

KEEPING THE PEACE:
A GROUNDED THEORY OF SCHOOL BOARD WORK IN RURAL FLORIDA

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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The purpose of this study was to describe school board member perceptions of their goals, problems, adjustments, and accomplishments. Five questions guided the research: (1) How do school board candidates define school board work while running for election and what do they hope to accomplish once in office? (2) What work do school board members actually do once elected and how does this work differ from candidates' pre-election expectations? (3) Do school board members adjust to the reality of their work and how do they perceive those adjustments? (4) What factors facilitate or inhibit the accomplishment of their desired goals? (5) How effective are school board members in matters related to governance and school improvement?

Data were collected over four years from 11 participants in three demographically similar rural Florida districts using in-depth interviews, observations, and document reviews. Ethnographic and grounded theory data-analysis indicated that the nature of

school board work revolved around a single cultural theme that board members use to organize their behavior and interpret their experience. This theme explains what board members do and why they do it and predicts new member experiences, behaviors, and perceptions of board work.

Keeping the peace—the district’s political peace and a school board member’s psychological peace—is the theme that helps explain school board work. Three implementing sub-themes, “giving up” original goals, “giving in” to a critical and demanding public, and “giving over” support to the superintendent, further explain the work.

Two contrasting board member ideal types demonstrate two competing models of governance: the corporate-bureaucratic governance model and a democratic governance model. Keeping the peace discourages practices that a democratic theory of governance demands and poses a threat to citizen control of the schools. Board members face a dilemma: to keep the peace or to keep faith in democratic principles of governance. This study proposes how school board work could function if it were guided by the principles of democratic theory, making democratic principles both the means and the ends of board work.

CHAPTER 1 BACKGROUND

Introduction

The survival of a democratic society depends upon an educated citizenry. As Lortie (1975) wrote in his classic study of the teaching profession, “public schools . . . are among our major social, economic, and political institutions” (p. vii) and they operate “on the assumption that citizens have the obligation and capacity to support and rule them” (p. 22). By statute, school board members, as representatives of the local citizenry, govern the public schools. The work of boards is important to schools and the polity, yet we know little about their daily work. Peirce (as cited in Danzberger & Usdan, 1992) described the school board as “that dark island of American governance, the institution that everyone knows of but few understand” (p. 98).

Review of Literature

Law, local custom, and a research orthodoxy in both education and the social sciences describe and guide school board members’ work. I use the term “orthodox literature” to mean writings that offer a set of generally accepted views about the traditional school board role. I refer to this set of common assumptions about board work as the best-practices orthodoxy. I have organized the literature under the headings “Expert Perspective Literature” or “Social-Scientific Perspective Literature.”

Expert Perspective Literature

Professionals and officials closely associated with school board professional associations write to convince a school board audience to adopt the best-practices orthodoxy. These authors' writings are more prescriptive than analytical and are more likely to describe future fads than to evaluate current practice (Cummings, 1996a, 1996b; Fisher & Shannon, 1992; Hartsell, 1998; Kitchens & Hartsell, 1996; Rosenberger, 1993, 1997; Shannon, 1982, 1992). They fail to question the traditional description of school board work found in Florida Statutes, texts in the field of educational administration (Kimbrough & Nunnery, 1988; Knezevich, 1984), articles in professional journals such as the American School Board Journal (Banach, 1989; Donoian, 1981; Reecer, 1989; Saks, 1990; Shanker, 1989; Shannon, 1982), or reports by professional organizations (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996; National School Board Association, 1982, 1992, 1994; National School Boards Association Task Force on School Governance, 1994).

For example, a report by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (1996) described the school board role in simple business terms:

Boards of education will essentially follow the model of corporate boards in business and industry. They will take responsibility for adopting goals, policies, and standards of accountability; for approving the district's budget; and for hiring and monitoring the superintendent, who will be free to run day-to-day operations. (p. 74)

Drawing on survey research and state statutes, Kimbrough and Nunnery (1988) explained the school board role and provided another example of the best-practices orthodoxy.

In fulfilling the responsibility to oversee the operation of the schools of the local district consistent with the laws of the state, the local school board

will appropriately engage in policy making, legislative, judicial, planning, interpretative, and appraisal activities. In making policy, the board describes in general terms the objectives to be achieved. Legislative activities take place by the approval in school board meetings of motions and resolutions (e.g., approval of budgets, personnel appointments, salary schedules, textbooks, curriculum changes). By such actions their policies become reality. They function in a judicial sense when as a unit they hold hearings (e.g., considering a pupil expulsion or teacher dismissal). The board engages in planning as it examines the needs of the local school district and considers alternative courses of action to meet these needs. . . . Through their discussions with and explanations to the citizens the board interprets. In making judgments about the adequacy of the programs offered by the district, the extent to which money has been wisely spent, and the quality of performance of employees, the board is appraising. (p. 197)

When school boards do their work well, one expert-perspective author (Poston, 1994) insisted, schools work well. Good policy and careful oversight create quality in the schools and are responsible for the system's success or failure. Poston, like other expert-perspective authors, failed to provide empirical evidence for his claims.

The expert-perspective literature describes school board work and suggests how board members should best fulfill their responsibilities. It amounts to a booster literature that promotes what I call a best-practices orthodoxy (Kimbrough & Nunnery, 1988; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996; National School Board Association, 1982, 1992, 1994; National School Board Association Task Force on School Governance, 1994; Poston, 1994; Rosenberger, 1993, 1997). This orthodoxy defines the role of the school board member as extensive (National School Board Association, 1992, 1994; National School Board Association Task Force on School Governance, 1994; Poston, 1994; Rosenberger, 1993), unambiguous (Kimbrough & Nunnery, 1988; National School Board Association, 1994, National School Board Association Task Force on School Governance, 1994), bureaucratic (National Association of Secondary School

Principals, 1996), and legalistic (Ferrell, 1997; Russo, 1992). It emphasizes power and authority (Florida K-20 Education Code, 2002) over democratic discussion and collective persuasion.

The expert perspective literature, largely uninformed by empirical research, assumes the legitimacy of the best-practices orthodoxy it describes and promotes. The expert literature does not, however, include empirical research data on the actual work of school board members and does not tell us if school board members' work matches the role described in the orthodox literature.

Social-Scientific Perspective Literature

Unlike the expert perspective literature, the social-scientific perspective literature identifies problems with school board members' work. Its authors are political scientists (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, & Usdan, 1990; Cistone, 1975, 1977, 1982; Iannoccone & Lutz, 1970; Kirst, 1984, 1994a, 1994b; Kirst & Mosher, 1969; Lutz, 1975; Lutz & Iannoccone, 1978; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971; Tucker & Zeigler, 1980; Wirt & Kirst, 1972; Zeigler & Jennings, 1974), historians (Tyack, 1967, 1974, 1981; Tyack & Cuban, 1995), and sociologists (Charters, 1955; Counts, 1927; First & Walberg, 1992; Lortie, 1975) who write to a scholarly audience. They conduct empirical studies of school board work and often write from a critical perspective. I have divided this section into two subsections, early literature and current literature.

Early social-scientific perspective literature. Like the expert perspective literature, the early social-scientific perspective literature fails to question the best-practices orthodoxy. It does, however, acknowledge problems surrounding the school board role. Koerner (1968) claimed that the school board role was the most "ill-defined

in local government [and that the best-practices orthodoxy was] an accretion of customs, attitudes, and legal precedents without much specificity" (p.122). He described board members as moving "in a sea of confusion about their powers" (p. 122). Political scientists, claiming that educational governance was a "largely uncharted area of research concentration" (Kirst & Mosher, 1969, p. 623) reflecting "almost pathetic naïveté" (Zeigler, 1975, p. 3), attributed this condition to professional parochialism (Kirst & Mosher, 1969).

Researchers traced this parochialism to the early twentieth century's Progressive Reform Movement. Wirt and Kirst (1972) stated that the "watchwords of reform became centralization, expertise, professionalization, nonpolitical control, and efficiency" (p. 7). The establishment of a separate and independent educational governance structure isolated school governance (Kirst & Mosher, 1969). Tyack (1974) reported that "under the guise of the slogan 'taking the schools out of politics' . . . lay community control gave way to the corporate bureaucratic model" (p. 7). This emergent bureaucratic structure divided governance into two layers, part-time citizens and full-time professional administrators (Lortie, 1975). The corporate-bureaucratic governance model focused on efficiency in business transactions (Counts, 1927; Tyack, 1974) and encouraged board members to defer their rank authority to the professionals' technical expertise (Boyd, 1975; Charters, 1953).

The bureaucratic governance structure promoted the view of the board as trustees of an objective public interest, a view that discouraged board members from acting as delegates and representatives of any special interests and undermined the school boards' representative nature (Boyd, 1975; Kerr, 1954; Zerchykov, 1984).

Judicial constraints on boards' legal authority, as well as bureaucratization, usurped the board's traditional role. Hazard (1978) noted,

The policy-making role of local school boards is modified by the capacity of the courts to examine educational issues and adopt positions which effectively preempt the board's policies on these matters. Through federal and state legislation, court decisions, and local opinions, the law clearly denies the mythology that says educational policy making is the function of the local school board. (p. 18)

One researcher, Usdan (1975), recognized these conditions as a threat to the democratic ideal. He stated:

The growing professional and bureaucratic domination of the educational enterprise [along with a] much larger, more centralized, and complex [society are forces that erode the] public's capacity to influence public education. . . . Bluntly stated, the public, contrary to popular opinion, no longer actually controls its schools through the elected or appointed officials who serve on school boards. (p. 271-2)

Current social-scientific perspective literature. A small group of contemporary researchers consider the conditions of public education governance systems in light of recent reform efforts. They confirm problems with board work, raise concerns regarding the legitimacy of the boards' role, and question the efficacy of existing structures of governance. They also question the assumptions of the best-practices orthodoxy (Danzberger, 1992, 1994; Danzberger et al., 1986; Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan, 1992; Danzberger & Usdan, 1992, 1994; Finn, 1991, 1992, First, 1992; Kirst, 1984, 1994a, 1994b; Miron & Wimpelberg, 1992).

The Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on School Governance (1992) claimed school boards face "a serious crisis of legitimacy and relevance" (p. 1). They cited three major reports issued in 1983—A Nation at Risk, Making the Grade, and High School: A

Report on Secondary Education—as adding up to “a ringing vote of no confidence in the existing structure of public education governance” (p. 5).

Researchers call school boards, “forgotten players on the American public education team” (Danzberger, Carol, Cunningham, Kirst, McCloud, & Usdan, 1987, p. 59). They claim that local public school governance systems have had “little coherent attention [and remain] largely untouched by the nation’s education reform agenda” (Danzberger & Usdan, 1994). Danzberger (1992) concluded that major educational reforms affecting governance have rendered local boards “increasingly irrelevant” (p. 68) and, she noted, “there are no controlled studies that isolate variables in governance behaviors and assess impact on degrees of success in specific education reforms” (p. 70).

Researchers of an extensive study identified specific problems in school board work: (a) boards spend too little time on major concerns such as policy making and policy oversight and too much time on administrative trivia, (b) more special interests candidates are serving on school boards, (c) boards are becoming less effective, (d) the board-superintendent relationship does not work well, (e) board members lack the conflict resolution skills needed for the job, (f) boards are reactive rather than proactive, and (g) they have poor relationships with state and local governments (Danzberger & Usdan, 1992).

Researchers surveyed 266 school boards and concluded that boards are unable to meet demands for reform and accountability because they lack a common view of the board role and a commitment to and skills for conflict resolution (Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan, 1992). Others concluded that boards waste most of their time on trivial pursuits (Carver, 1990; Lewis, 1988).

Nowakowski and First (1989) refuted these contentions. They evaluated the degree and nature of local policy making that resulted from Illinois state reform legislation as measured by the number of reform-related board motions, discussions, or reports documented in board minutes of 12 sample districts. They found that a major proportion of board meeting time was devoted to the business aspects of running the educational system rather than to policy making on issues of learning or educational reform. They suggested this as a reason why reform initiatives had not been enacted to a greater extent. Their findings conflict with those who claim that board members are mired not in business pursuits but in trivial pursuits.

Tallerico (1989a) claimed that difficulties in the board-superintendent relationship are a result of the ambiguous line between board policy making and administrative implementation. Because of this ambiguity and the "ill-defined nature of the job . . . behind the scenes, board members and superintendents use informal communication networks to negotiate . . . the roles each party should play" (Tallerico, 1989b, pp. 25-26). This finding suggests that the reality of school board work may well differ from the best-practices orthodoxy.

Kirst (1984) claimed that board powers are formally limited by the state and informally limited by superintendents and local constituencies and interest groups. Such constraints render school boards "a convenient flak-catcher [for problems in the system] with little authority or discretion to ameliorate causes of citizens' complaints" (p. 163). He described local boards as being squeezed both from the top by the growing influence of the courts and federal and state government and from the bottom by teacher unions that limit their discretion to make decisions. Recent top-down interventions, he says,

reflect a loss of confidence in the school board's policy-making capacity. In the years between 1984 and 1994, "the biggest loser in policy influence [over the schools] has been the local school board" (Kirst, 1994a, p. 38). This erosion of confidence and influence is likely to continue, he says, unless we rethink and revamp the school board role.

Community perceptions are negative and declining. Doubts are forming about the "capacity and political will of school boards . . . as currently structured . . . to govern and provide leadership adequate to the task of achieving systemic reform" (Danzberger, 1994, p. 369). In short, says Danzberger (1992), school boards are "an institution in trouble . . . a dysfunctional defender of the status quo" (p. 68).

The social-scientific literature identifies the core problems boards face: ambiguity about the role, constraints on their powers, a lack of capacity, insufficient skill and will, and a mounting loss of faith in school board governance. Social-scientific perspective researchers raise doubts that the work of school board members conforms to the best-practices orthodoxy.

Yet, the social scientific literature analysis is limited. It fails to explain school board work and its meaning for school board members. It tells us little about board member goals, motivations, rewards, frustrations, or accomplishments.

According to Cistone's (1982) review of the literature, the research in both education and political science regarding school boards is riddled with gaps and contradictory findings and is "characterized by hortatory and nontheoretical perspectives [and] institutional-legalistic analyses" (p. 1638).

Potential Threat

Counts (1934) claimed that the democratic ideal is "the highest and most characteristic ethical expression of the genius of the American people" (p. 9). Of the democratic faith and its importance to America, Webb and Sherman (1989) stated, "our continued faith in democracy accounts for what we have achieved as a nation" (p. 85). They described central tenets of this faith as (a) free and open expression of ideas, (b) inclusiveness that assures that no one is excluded from participating in the democratic discussion, (c) bringing reason to bear on common problems, (d) public discussion on matters of public policy, (e) belief in the process of debate and tolerance of conflict, and (f) understanding the necessity of compromise between people who have diverse personal preferences.

These skills, reflected in board work, are essential to the democratic ideal of citizen control of the schools. Researchers who suggest that citizens may no longer control their schools sound an alarm (Boyd, 1975; Charters, 1953; Usdan, 1975; Zeigler & Jennings, 1974).

If the common role assumptions found in the literature are incorrect, standard school board practices may be ineffective, citizen control of the schools illusionary, and the democratic ideal at risk. A disparity between school board research orthodoxy and the realities of school board life might explain school board governance problems described in the literature, that, if not addressed, may mean that school board effectiveness continues its decline, public confidence in school boards continues its spiral, and school system governance moves further from the people it is organized to serve.

In this study I investigated school board governance problems and the veracity of the assumptions surrounding the best-practices orthodoxy. Using methods that researchers too often neglect, and that illuminate problems and conditions of the every-day work that researchers miss when using survey methods, I examined the work of school board members in three rural Florida school districts and answered five questions about school boards in these districts:

1. How do school board member candidates define school board work while running for election and what do they hope to accomplish once in office?
2. What work do school board members actually do once elected and how does the actual work of a board member differ from candidate's pre-election expectations?
3. Do school board members adjust to the reality of their work and how do they perceive those adjustments?
4. What factors facilitate or inhibit the accomplishment of their desired goals?
5. How effective are school board members in matters related to governance and school improvement?

In this study I define board work in rural Florida and identify where the reality of the work contradicts work descriptions found in the law and the literature. I used ethnographic and grounded theory methodology to develop a theory that is grounded in these material realities of board work.

CHAPTER 2 METHODS: ETHNOGRAPHY AND GROUNDED THEORY

Overview

Thomas (1966) contended that researchers must seek full understanding of social institutions by not limiting themselves “to the abstract study of its formal organization, but [rather by analyzing] the way in which [the institution] appears in the personal experiences of various members of the group and [following] the influence which it has upon their lives” (p. 13). Such methods “illuminate social realities, human perceptions, and organizational realities untainted by the intrusion of formal measurement procedures or reordering the situation to fit the preconceived notions of the investigation” (Owens, 1982, p.7).

I used both ethnographic and grounded theory methodology to analyze school board work and the influence that the work has on board member behaviors. Spradley (1979, 1980) has organized the methods of questioning, collecting data, recording data, and analyzing data into a cyclical process he calls the Developmental Research Sequence (DRS). These qualitative methods begin without precise hypotheses that might interfere with the discovery of new knowledge, and illuminate board member perceptions of their social and organizational reality.

Goals of Ethnography and Grounded Theory

Ethnographic methods penetrate surface appearances and illuminate perspectives through which people make sense of their world. Ethnographies can describe actors’

behaviors, the situations in which they define their goals, strategies they employ to achieve their ends, and the subjective underpinnings of their cultural situations (Woods, 1988).

Spradley (1979) notes that the goal of ethnographic research is to discover and describe a cultural meaning system. Every culture is a way of seeing the world, a complex pattern—a system of meaning integrated into a larger pattern—that provides its members with principles to interpret situations and guide their actions. He defines culture as “the knowledge that people have learned as members of a group” (p. 7), “a set of instructions for carrying out ordinary activities of life” (p. 214).

Cultural description, the first step in understanding a culture, is the central task of ethnography. Understanding and explaining school board work-culture involves gathering information about this reality and discovering assumptions about the nature of board member reality and the values that define the good and bad in that reality. Ethnographic research proceeds simultaneously on two levels—examining the small details of culture and charting the broader features of the cultural landscape. Ethnography involves learning from people about their cultural perspective and building a theory based on their common experience.

Ethnography and grounded theory are closely related methodologies. Ethnography demands a descriptive emphasis but it also generates the discovery of cultural themes that can be organized into a grounded theory (Spradley, 1979; Woods, 1988). Grounded theory illuminates relationships within the data that suggest testable hypotheses. These two methods can be used to discover a main cultural theme that sums

up an original theory with explanatory power over the phenomena and behavior under study (Glaser, 1978; Hutchinson, 1988; Spradley, 1979).

I employed ethnographic and grounded theory methodologies to develop a theory of board work "grounded in empirical data of cultural description" (Spradley, 1979, p. 11).

Sample Selection

School Districts

I collected data in three quite similar Florida school districts. Each district, through elections held every two years, chooses five board members-at-large to serve staggered four-year terms. All three districts elect their superintendents. The major similarities of these three districts relate to population, financial resources, and student performance.

All three districts are small and rural, ranking in the lower half of all Florida counties in both general population and student population. The general population in these counties is less than 54,000 (Florida Statistical Abstract, 2001a) and the student population is less than 6,100 (Florida Department of Education, 2002).

Sample counties are not only small and rural, they are also poor. Each district has a limited economic base, relying heavily upon the state and federal government for its subsistence (Florida Department of Education, 2000). Per capita personal income, as a measure of district poverty, is less than \$20,000, placing these counties in the bottom third of all counties in the state (Florida County Rankings, 2001b). Each county's tax base is so limited that local revenue sources provide less than one quarter of their total budget. Correspondingly, the state contributes as much as \$8 of every \$10 to each

county's education revenues (Florida Department of Education, 2000). The percentages of students receiving free and reduced lunches (FRL), often used as an indicator of poverty among school populations, are all over 50% as compared to a statewide average of 44% (Florida Department of Education, 1998).

Student performance in these three districts is among the lowest in the state. Rado (1998) reported on an analysis of test scores completed by a Florida House of Representatives' committee. The committee created an index of composite test scores and rated each county on a scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Across the state, scores ranged from 1.11 to 4.11, the average score was 2.76, and the median score was 2.78. The performance of students in these three counties fell into or near the bottom quartile of all districts in the state.

School Board Members

Tables 1, 2, and 3 describe the 11 participants in this study. The majority were white, male, aged 40 and over, in their first or second term, had no children currently in the system, had college degrees, worked in management positions, and were registered Democrats. All had been married for 20 years or more. All had some post-secondary education; six had college degrees—four of these were in education, three had some college, and two had vocational training. Eight of the board members either had a degree in education and had worked in the school system or had worked in the educational system as a teacher aide or a volunteer on a school improvement team in the local school system. One participant was black and three were female. Ages of all participants ranged from 40 to 71. Three had no jobs outside of the board work and two of these three were

retired. Three had children in the school system. Only two had a parent with a college degree—four participants responded that at least one parent had less than a high school diploma—and three did not answer the question. Two were Republicans—both from the same county.

Table 1. School Board Member Participants: County A

Participant descriptor	George	Peter	Larry	Barbara	
Race	W	W	W	W	
Sex	M	M	M	F	
Age	40	42	66	55	
Religion	Protestant	Baptist	Baptist	No preference	
Children in system	Y	Y	N	N	
Political party	D	D	D	D	
Former political office	N	N	N	N	
Labor union member	Y	Y	N	Y	
Management experience	Y	Y	Y	N	
Formal education	BS	Some college	MA	BA	
Parents level of education	Mother Father	12th grade 8th grade	12th grade 6th grade	6th grade 6th grade	No answer No answer
Years on board	4	10	8 months	8 months	

Table 2. School Board Member Participants: County B

Participant descriptor	Fred	William	Jane	Tom
Race	W	W	B	W
Sex	M	M	F	M
Age	49	57	71	49
Religion	Methodist	Baptist	Methodist	Methodist
Children in system	N	N	N	N
Political party	D	D	D	D
Former political office	Mayor N Town Council		N	N
Labor union member	N	N	Y	N
Management experience	Y	Y	N	Y
Formal education	BA	Vocational training	MS	Vocational training
Parents level of education				
Mother	HS	No answer	No answer	HS
Father	HS	No answer	No answer	HS
Years on board	8	31	8 months	8

Board experience levels of the 11 participants ranged from 7 months to 31 years.

Seven participants were in either their first or second term and three of the board members who were in their third or later term came from one district. Two had held former political office, and five had been members of a union at some time in their lives.

Table 3. School Board Member Participants: County C

Participant descriptor	Kurt	Laura	Matt
Race	W	W	W
Sex	M	F	M
Age	47	52	43
Religion	Baptist	Methodist	Methodist
Children in system	N	N	Y
Political party	D	R	R
Former political office	N	N	City Commission
Labor union member	Y	N	N
Management experience	Y	N	Y
Formal education	BS	Some college	Some college
Parents level of education			
Mother	MA	8th grade	HS
Father	AA	HS	MA
Years on board	7 months	3	3

Data Collection

Ethnography and grounded theory data-gathering techniques include observations, interviews, and document reviews (Wolcott, 1985). Over a period of four years I gathered over 500 pages of data about school board member work using these techniques.

The Ethnographic Interview

The ethnographic interview is a well-accepted technique for collecting primary qualitative data (Lofland, 1971). "Understanding the subjective world of people within a given field of work calls for long, detailed, and open-ended interviews." (Lortie, 1975, p. ix). Spradley states, "Interviews must range widely over many topics; they must also go deeply into particular topics" (1979, p. 134).

During my ethnographic interviews I asked questions to learn how school board members see their work and to grasp their perspectives about the meanings of their work. I interviewed 11 board member participants from my selected districts, asking them broad questions about their work. All interviews took place in the participants' home county, three board members invited me into their homes, four into their places of business, and four met me in a district school. Interviews spanned a period of 20 months.

I began interviews with a list of open-ended questions from a questionnaire. I probed participant responses for further information and clarification when I felt such probing might yield useful data. My interviews became more focused as the investigation proceeded and I adjusted my questions "to the [interview] situation at hand, to the emerging world view of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic [under study]" (Merriam, 1988, p. 74). Glaser and Strauss (1967) note that the analysis of data occurs simultaneously with its collection. Because of this, preliminary analysis sometimes influenced questions asked in subsequent interview rounds.

Ethnographic Observation

I observed 13 board meetings, workshops, and training sessions over a period of 16 months. During observations I identified speakers and situations, recorded the actual

words spoken as much as possible, and used concrete terms to describe details (Spradley, 1980, p. 65). Because Spradley (1979) recommends the use of extensive field notes, I included in my field notes a description of every meeting I attended during this study: a detailed description of the physical setting and how board members dressed and conducted themselves—what they said and did. I noted the dynamics of verbal exchanges at board meetings: topics covered, time spent on different topics, content of speech, flow of communication, and amount of discussion. I noted descriptions of the homes, schools, and places of business in which I met with or observed school board members. I drew layouts and seating arrangements of board meetings and training sessions. I noted questions for further exploration.

In each case, I made a condensed account of what I observed, identifying speakers and verbatim statements. At the first opportunity, I created an expanded account. For example, I would slip away to a quiet spot between sessions and, using pencil and paper or a tape recorder, I recounted observations, filled in details, and recalled things not recorded on the spot.

During times when I was observing and collecting data and field notes—before and after meetings and at training sessions—board members spoke with me informally about their work, some by phone. Many other people also initiated conversations with me during my district and training-session visits: a newspaper reporter, union representatives, trainers, parents, a superintendent, citizen observers, and several administrators.

I made extensive notes about these informal conversations as soon as I had the opportunity to do so. For example, I often spoke into a tape recorder on my drive home from district board meetings, and then transcribed these notes when I had more time.

Document Review

Document analysis is a type of unobtrusive measure that neither contaminates the data nor requires the cooperation of a subject (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966, p.2). I reviewed the following documents relative to the nature of board work: agendas and minutes of meetings and workshops; newspaper clippings; school board policies; Florida statutes; and Florida School Board Association publications, training materials, and conference proceedings. These data provided me with ideas and background for further data-gathering and analysis.

After each interview, informal conversation, observation, or document review I transcribed and coded my data, eliminating discrepancies and noting holes in my data. I continued until further data collection no longer added new information, and further questioning yielded redundant information.

Research Journal

In addition to the above sources of data, I kept many additional notes. These notes comprise what Spradley (1979) calls the research journal.

[The research journal is] an introspective record of field work [that] enables a person to take into account personal biases and feelings [and] to understand their influence on the research. . . . [It] represents the personal side of fieldwork [and] includes reactions to informants and the feelings you sense from others. Like a diary, [it contains] a record of experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs and problems that arise during fieldwork. (p. 76)

Data Analysis

The written records of all data gathered in the study—including transcribed interviews, field notes of observations and documents reviewed, and a research journal—make up the ethnographic record. My ethnographic record consisted of over 500 pages

of transcribed interviews and observations. This record is the “bridge between discovery and description” from which I produced this cultural description (Spradley, 1979, p. 70), and which led to the discovery of a grounded theory of board work.

Ethnographic analysis, as a tool for discovering cultural meaning, is “a search for the parts of a culture, the relationships among the parts, and their relationships to the whole” (Spradley, 1979, p.142). During analysis, I created another kind of field notes. Analytic and interpretive notes –like brainstorming—are a way to “think on paper” (Spradley, 1979, p.76). Bogdan and Biklen (1982) describe the analytic process as “working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p.145).

Data analysis is an inductive process in which the ethnographer searches for patterns, discovers relationships, forms categories, poses questions, and discovers meaning (Wolcott, 1985). After my interviews, I transcribed the data, examined it, and began preliminary coding. I organized the data into domains and searched for patterns in my interview data and field notes (Spradley, 1979; Hutchinson, 1988). These preliminary patterns and domains suggested further information to be gathered. I returned to each district, visiting with previous informants, making new contacts, and coaxing hesitant board members to participate in the study. Eventually, these preliminary categories in which I had placed my data became “theoretically saturated” (Glaser, 1965, p. 441-442), that is, further data collection no longer enriched my categories or clarified emerging theory. In fact, interviews became repetitive.

Spradley's (1979) Developmental Research Sequence (DRS) guided my search for patterns in the data. This sequence included domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, componential analysis, and theme analysis—strategies that form a systematic and rigorous organizational process. I also used the constant comparative method that Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe. This provided for a final level of analysis that led to discovery of a main cultural theme that encapsulated the nature of board work and suggested testable hypotheses about the work.

Using the ethnographic record as the source of all analysis, I searched for order and understanding. My analysis proceeded by examining and analyzing my data, "dividing it into its constituent parts, [and] then identifying the relationships among the parts and their relationship to the whole" (Spradley, 1979, p. 92).

Domain Analysis

The domain analysis is the first and most important unit of analysis in Spradley's Developmental Research Sequence. School board members' cultural knowledge about their work is already organized into categories called domains. My goal was to discover this organization of knowledge—to identify categories of thought and gain a preliminary overview of board work.

Taxonomic Analysis

The next step in the sequence, taxonomic analysis, expanded the domain analysis. In reality, domain analysis and taxonomic analysis often happen simultaneously as two parts of a single process. I verified the correctness of my hypothesized domains by formulating structural questions for each domain, developing an exhaustive list of the elements of each domain. Then I made an in-depth analysis of a few selected domains,

seeking understanding and searching for relationships among domains “while still attempting to gain a surface understanding of [board work] as a whole . . . finding the relationships among domains to gain a holistic picture of the culture” (Spradley, 1979, p. 134).

As I moved to asking structural questions of my data, I searched for more inclusive domains that incorporated other processes and domains as subsets. Spradley (1979) states that the researcher’s task is to deconstruct social situations into discrete units, categorize the units, and then reconstruct the social environment in a way that organizes and explains the situation. He calls this step a taxonomic analysis, “a search for larger, more inclusive domains that might include as a subset the one you are analyzing” (p. 146). This type of analysis organizes seemingly unrelated domains into a definitive structure that identifies and defines domains by common characteristics. I created a taxonomic structure that described school board member goals, problems, work conditions, accomplishments and adjustments.

Componential Analysis

Taxonomic analysis discloses single relationships among a set of terms, while the next step—a componential analysis—seeks to discover multiple semantic relationships.

Spradley (1979) describes this step as follows:

[It] includes the entire process of searching for contrasts, sorting them out, grouping some together as dimensions of contrast, and entering all this information onto a paradigm . . . [which is] a schematic representation of the attributes which distinguish the members of a contrast set. [Such paradigms are part of cognitive maps that] enables [group members] to anticipate future situations, plan for them, and make decisions of various sorts. . . . A person’s cultural knowledge is made up of hundreds of such ‘maps,’ all interrelated into a complex system of cultural meanings. . . . [In short], componential analysis seeks to discover the psychological reality of the informant’s world. (pp. 175-6; 178-9)

Theme Analysis

Culture is a set of instructions for carrying out activities in certain situations—tacit rules of behavior appropriate to the cultural situation (Spradley, 1979). Spradley's final step in the DRS is discovering cultural themes.

While examining dimensions of contrast, I discovered conceptual themes recurrent in a number of domains that connected domains, giving a holistic view of board work. Spradley defines a cultural theme as “a cognitive principle . . . something that people believe, accept as true and valid; a common assumption about the nature of their experience” (p. 186). Ethnographers must make inferences about the principles that exist.

Most cultural themes remain at the tacit level of knowledge. People do not express them easily, even though they know the cultural principle and use it to organize their behavior and interpret experience. Themes come to be taken for granted; they slip into that area of knowledge where people are not quite aware or seldom find the need to express what they know. (Spradley, 1979, p.188)

When I was well into my analysis, I discovered that my categories focused on a main cultural theme that had wide-range explanatory power over my data. Strauss (1987) called this step “axial coding . . . [discovering] a dense texture of relationships around the ‘axis’ of the category being focused upon” (p. 64). This axis encompassed all of my domains and allowed me to organize and account for all of my data. In short, this main cultural theme explained the nature of the work of school board members.

Researcher Bias

In ethnographic and grounded theory methodology, the researcher is the instrument of data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Eisner, 1988; Wolcott, 1985). However, when the researcher is the instrument, bias is an inherent danger that is important to guard against. Throughout the entire research process, and especially in the

analysis of this study, I built in several features to limit the distorting effects of personal bias generated by my prior experiences. Schwartz and Schwartz (1969) claimed that the researcher must

- 1) be motivated to look for his biases;
- 2) look for them actively and, having come upon a bias, explore its meaning and ramifications; and
- 3) look upon the uncovering of his biases as a continuous process of discovery—as an ongoing process to which there is no end (p.103).

I confronted my biases directly and actively monitored them beginning before the first data collection. I interviewed myself, tape recording, transcribing, and coding my responses to the questions that I had created for my participants. This allowed me to become aware of many of my biases and refer back to them as needed throughout the research.

Then, during data collection and analysis, I bracketed my reflections and remarks in both my field notes and my research journal. Spradley (1979) describes the research journal as “an introspective record of field work [that] enables a person to take into account personal biases and feelings [and] to understand their influence on the research” (p. 76).

These methods isolated my prejudices, reminding me of their possible impact on the data collected. I took other precautions as well. During interviews, I kept questions open-ended to maximize discovery in order to allow participants to describe their worlds in their own language. Merriam (1988) advised the researcher to be “neutral and nonjudgmental” (p. 75) and Patton (1980) emphasized the importance of finding out “what is in and on someone else’s mind” (p. 196). The data come from the informant’s mind, not the researcher’s mind. This provided data for a thick, rich description of board

work. I focused entirely on the informant, resisting any personal or judgmental comments or leading questions. I used original structured interview protocol questions. I varied from it and probed only as a result of topics brought up by participants. I audio taped each interview and transcribed it into a typed protocol for analysis. These taped interviews provide an audit trail that can be examined for neutrality and researcher bias.

Another way I sought to control observer bias was to gather data through multiple data-source methods (Hutchinson, 1988). I collected data through formal and informal interviews, field observations, and the collection of artifacts. This not only minimized my observer bias, but also increased the wealth of data I collected.

Other features built into this study increased the reliability and validity of results and served to further transcend bias. These features will be discussed below.

Reliability

Shimahara (1990) states that "ethnographic reliability refers to the repeatability of a given study by [other] researchers[,] . . . the extent to which independent researchers discover the same phenomena in comparable situations" (p. 86). I have provided a complete description of the research process: the "delineation of the physical, cultural, and social contexts of the study; a statement of the conceptual framework of research; and a complete description of the methods of data collection and analysis" (Shimahara, 1990, p. 87). This should make the study replicable.

As an ethnographer, examining and interpreting behavior in its social context, I attempted to provide one part of a complex picture—to "get it right"—both "the cultural dimensions of behavior . . . and the rightness of the account" (Wolcott, 1985, p. 54). I

relied on careful methods of data collection and analysis to make this part of the picture meaningful and accurate (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).

Typed protocols of interviews and observations, field notes, and a research journal enhance reliability by providing an explicit audit trail (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Spradley (1980) emphasized "the verbatim principle" (p. 67). It is important to maintain data that are verbatim accounts, using electronic recording instruments. The electronic recording of interviews and events adds to the audit trail and increases the accuracy of data collection.

Merriam (1988) claimed that reliability is strengthened with cross-site comparisons of data. I collected data from three different counties and compared my data across sites. Comparisons of interviews and field notes across districts served as a source of cross-verification. Miles and Huberman (1984) call this cross verification process triangulation. Triangulation, the corroboration of propositions and the convergence of evidence through multiple sources, is also a means of interpreting contradictions and inconsistencies in the data (Mathison, 1988). "By combining methods . . . observers can partially overcome the deficiencies that flow from one investigator or one method" (Denzin, 1978, p. 294). I triangulated data from informant interviews, observations, and document analysis.

Validity

Validity refers to the authenticity of an account—whether or not the method discovers "the authentic representation of what is happening in a social situation" (Shimahara, 1990, p. 86). This is also referred to as "the fit between the model and the reality" (Lancy, 1978, p. 125). "Establishing validity requires determining the extent to

which conclusions effectively represent empirical reality and assessing whether constructs devised by researchers represent or measure the categories of human experience that occur" (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, p. 32). Once I hypothesized the components of an explanatory model, I strengthened the validity of these findings using a process summarized by Becker (1970):

After constructing a model specifying the relationships among various elements of this part of the organization, the observer seeks greater accuracy by successively refining the model to take account of evidence which does not fit his previous formulation; by searching for negative cases (items of evidence which run counter to the relationships hypothesized in the model) which might force such revision; and by searching intensively for the interconnections *in vivo* of the various elements he has conceptualized from his data. (p. 34)

I verified this fit by discussing my results with informants for information and feedback. Called a member check, it was an opportunity for informants to confirm, question, or refute my findings and interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

In addition to member checks, I established validity by maximizing the length of time spent on the study and the amount of data collected and analyzed, by using multiple data collection methods and by searching the data for disconfirming evidence. I also presented the components of my explanatory model to a group of experienced school board members at a Florida School Board Association Conference and audio taped their feedback, which I added to my research protocol. This provided both confirmation and clarification for this model.

Spradley (1980) wrote, "In order for a reader to see the lives of the people we study, we must show them through particulars, not merely talk about them in generalities" (p. 162). I have provided thick, detailed, concrete descriptions and examples from my data, which lead to my interpretations. My description and

interpretation of board member work allow the reader to understand this work and provides insights that can be applied to other settings. A final test of the validity of this study will be its ability to inform the work of others who wish to understand school board work. Using the methods described in this chapter, I formulated a theory of board work that I will explicate in chapters 3 and 4.

CHAPTER 3 KEEPING THE PEACE

Overview

In this chapter I present school board members describing their pre-election goals and expectations and the post-election, problematic reality of school board work. I discuss the problems that confront school board members and influence their behaviors. I describe their struggles to make the work doable, to cite accomplishments, and to define effectiveness. I trace subtle changes in school board members' thinking from the time they contemplate running for office, through learning the ropes of their new work, through their adjustments to the unanticipated realities of their work, and on to the decision to run again or leave the school board. I show how keeping the peace emerges as a main cultural theme of school board work.

I propose and explicate a grounded theory of school board work. This theory has three implementing sub-themes that explain school board work behaviors: "giving up," "giving in," and "giving over." Balancing these sub-themes keeps the political peace within the school district and district offices and the psychological peace with school board members' own thinking and explanations of their work.

Expectations

"I saw a lot of things in the system I thought I could change for the better"
(Anonymous school board member).

First-time school board candidates observe their local school system and, like the board member quoted above, expect to make educational improvements. While campaigning, they identify problems, which they promise to solve if elected. Their pre-election goals embody their hopes to improve a good, but imperfect, school system. Below are examples of these promises that reflect what school-board candidates hope to accomplish.

“To build a new school.”

“To increase teacher salaries.”

“To balance the budget and get a reserve.”

“To provide textbooks and adequate classroom space.”

“To attract quality, in-field, certified teachers.”

“To provide teachers and students with what they need to improve the learning environment.”

“To improve safety and security in the schools.”

Once elected, candidates considered their election as an assessment and confirmation of their honesty, sincerity, fairness, and trustworthiness, as the quotes below demonstrate.

“I was a decent person. I had a good reputation. I was a family man and a hard worker. I was honest and I was trustworthy. People felt they could trust my judgment.”

“[People] know me and know what I stand for, what my principles are.”

“[The people] thought I was a fair person and [that] I would represent them.”

“People saw me as sincere and honest and [believed] I would try to do what was right.”

“The people put me there because they trust my judgment.”

"It's like, 'Hey! The people believed in me!'"

Board members seek to uphold this public trust. "All these people said, 'I trust you. I think you can help.' I'm not going to let them down."

Reality

"If you think this [work] is [just a meeting] every two weeks, you're going to have a rude awakening" (Anonymous school board member).

Committed to maintaining the public's trust, first-time school board members experienced a "rude awakening" as post-election reality collided with their pre-election expectations. Board members said they quickly discovered a reality that contradicted their preconceived notions of school-board work. "I'd been sitting watching board members for years, but I really didn't know what all was involved. People . . . clamoring for [the office] . . . don't know what they're asking for."

As experienced as I thought I was, I realized [the work] was going to be a lot harder than I thought. It was going to take a lot more work than I had even anticipated . . . and it was going to take every bit of energy and effort and experience and understanding and communication skill that I ever had or thought I could have in order to be successful in what I was trying to do. I thought, 'Is this really what I want to do?' Whew! That's a lot to expect!

Reality threatens members' commitment and shakes their hopes for significant accomplishments. Public expectations and misperceptions pressure them, legislative controls and constraints leave them feeling powerless and alienated, and a complex system that requires time to learn frustrates and intimidates them.

The Public

The public has varied interests, they misunderstand the board's power, and they are often poorly informed on issues. This makes board work more difficult. Occasionally,

said one school board member, public demands involve academic issues. “[Parents] want to make sure that their children are getting the education they need to have and that the board members are making decisions that are helping that to happen.”

More often than not, however, public expectations involve non-academic issues such as jobs, contracts, or sports. One member described the public’s concerns as “little picky things.” Several other board members voiced similar frustrations.

“My concern was academics . . . and, lo and behold, that was probably the least of people’s concerns. . . . It was a big disappointment to me—and a shock.”

“I found out that about 85 to 90% of the calls that I got from parents or teachers or school employees were all job-related—something to do with their job. I found very few . . . had an interest in curriculum or academics.”

“You know small communities and large communities—they are real strong on athletics. They want everybody to play ball, even those that don’t want to.”

“The business community wants a slice of the pie. If they don’t get it one way or another, you’re going to hear from them.”

“So many people are simply wanting something selfish, like a job.”

[Parents] are concerned more about . . . those little bitty things . . . “Are we gonna get to go to the Bahamas on the senior trip” . . . I had no idea we would get into the situation of being jury, so to speak, over a lot of little picky things like “my kid didn’t make the football team” or “my kid is in FFA and didn’t get to go on the FFA trip because they was suspended for a day out of school.” A lotta little things . . . “This teacher didn’t let my kid make up [his] work.”

Many board members also complained that the public misunderstands the board’s power:

“People look at the school board position as being more powerful than it is.”

"There are things you just don't control. . . . The sad part of that is people think when they elect you that you *do* control those things and you don't."

"People try to get you in the middle of things and get you to go to the principal . . . to use you as an influencing factor. . . . But I have no authority as an individual to call up a principal and tell him what to do."

"[The public] thinks school board members . . . can say, 'this is my district and this is the way we're going to do things.'"

Lastly, board members found the public ill informed.

"[The public] are not in the boardroom, they don't come to meetings. . . . They don't necessarily have all the information they need."

"Most of the time when people have a problem with something that's going on, they have a burr under their saddle. They want you to listen and they don't know as much as they think they know about the issue."

"The problem a lot of people have about school systems is they simply don't know what's going on. They don't have a clue."

The expectations of an uninformed but demanding public create conflict with school board members. Challenged to meet public demands, school board members confront yet another facet of their problematic reality, legislative controls and constraints.

The Legislature

The state legislature dictates what school board members can and cannot do: it issues numerous mandates and controls both state and local education funding. Board members find these controls and constraints frustrating, limiting, and stressful, as the following statements indicate.

You live with constraints as a board member. And most of them are dictated to you—mandated. You know, just like the dollars that they send you . . . [they] tell you how to spend them. If you had the flexibility to put those [dollars] where you needed them, or where you thought you needed them, it'd be a lot better.

"All we are is just an extension of the legislature. They send [the money] down here and tell us how to spend it, and we just sit here and make sure it's spent the way they want."

"You can look in the law book and the legislature pretty much tells you what you're supposed to do."

"You have to do everything [the legislature] tells you to do. That gets frustrating after a while."

"You move in one direction for a while and the next time the legislature meets they do a 90-degree turn and you're going in another direction for a while and the next time they meet you're going in another direction."

"[The state] mandates programs, they mandate reports, they mandate studies—and they could care less where the revenue to carry it out will come from. It makes it very stressful and demanding in the county to give [the state] the studies and reports that they want and carry out programs they mandate."

Property-poor districts, unable to raise local discretionary revenues from property taxes, rely almost entirely on state revenue to support education in their district. School board members say inadequate state funding is an obstacle to achieving their initial goals.

"[Money] kind of limits you in what you can do. Eighty-five percent of our operating budget comes from Tallahassee. Very little of it's generated locally because this is a poor county with a very poor tax base and very little money is generated here. You couldn't run the lights in these schools based on what this county generates. . . . We're tied to Tallahassee and whatever Tallahassee decides in that legislature to increase education . . . that's what we have to live with. If we can't get an increase out of the

legislature, then it is hard to give raises, to lower your teacher-student ratio, [to build] buildings.”

Board members believe that the legislature undermines local school board authority because Florida Statute permits the election of district school superintendents.¹ The National School Board Association and the American Association of School Administrators (1994) describe superintendent selection and evaluation as a critical board responsibility. One long-time board member criticized Florida’s unconventional arrangement condemning the legislature’s failure to give this critical duty to Florida’s school boards.

It almost seems to me as if the legislature at some point in time in their infinite wisdom had decided that most school boards are made up of incompetents—uneducated and irresponsible people. . . . It’s almost like the legislature says that the superintendent is wiser and smarter than all [board members] and he knows best.

Board members not only resent such legislative constraint, but also believe that the legislature neither understands nor addresses their problems. Two board members lamented:

“We, as isolated school districts, . . . don’t get the [same] recognition as the urban counties—because we don’t have the votes. . . . The urban problems are going to be met or visited first.”

How you gonna get representation for [our] county in Tallahassee? [The legislator] comes from somewhere else—a bigger place—and he ain’t gonna really understand who you are. There [are] very few people who understand the workings of a small county . . . and I don’t know how you

¹ According to the Southern Regional Education Board (2000), only 341 of the nation’s 15,000 district superintendents are elected and all are in southern region states. Of these states, Florida is the only state that elects a majority of its superintendents. Florida also has the largest percentage of districts that elect superintendents: South Carolina (1 of 86), Alabama (40 of 129), Florida (44 of 67), and Mississippi (69 of 149).

get that message across. I don't know who you tell. I don't know who would listen. We are just kind of like an island."

The System

Board members not only face legislative controls and constraints on board power as they struggle to meet public demands and accomplish their personal goals, they confront a complex and burdened system that is difficult to understand and confounds their work. Board members are often surprised at aspects of this system that they find difficult to understand. One board member summarized the situation as follows:

It is so complex. . . . You take a school budget. How many people [do] you think understand a school budget? It's so big in the first place, and if you're not a skilled person then it's hard for you to interpret that. . . . There's just so much about education that for one reason or the other it's not as simple as it was when I went to school, where you had a teacher and a few books—a very few books. She taught reading. She taught math. . . . Nowadays we just got skads of books. Our problem is getting kids to read 'em.

Other board members told how their naïveté about the system and its complexities frustrates and intimidates them.

"I didn't realize that funding was as hard to come by as it is."

"I was naïve about some of the things I thought I could accomplish and how fast I thought I'd accomplish them."

"I can look at a lot of things and I have no clue. It's too broad."

"I was [too] intimidated to ask questions. I just wasn't familiar enough with the system . . . it worried me to death."

Several board members described how the system, out of their control, can leave them feeling powerless.

"There's a lot of things beyond your control that you can't solve."

"Even though I think [something] needs to happen and can show just reasons and data that back it up, it doesn't mean it's going to happen."

"School board members do not have as much power as everyone has said that they get."

The system, slow and large and beyond their grasp, engenders disappointment and discouragement. Several board members described such feelings:

"I've been disappointed in a lot of ways because we can't do what I thought we could."

"Things don't move as fast as you want them to sometimes. . . . That is discouraging sometimes. Something . . . simple can be so complex in getting it done."

"The wheels of progress in the school districts are slow to turn sometimes."

One board member summed up the overwhelming problem of system complexity as follows

We are responsible for children—some of them from the time of conception until 21 years of age. We deal with taking care of pregnant teenagers. . . . We're charged with seeing that those babies are cared for while their mothers are in school. We're responsible for those babies to get to a day-care center. We're responsible to see that they're fed [morning], noon, and throughout summers. . . . We're charged with the responsibility for caring for [handicapped] students and to me that is not education. . . . We only have so many dollars, so much resources. And I don't begrudge a dollar that's spent on a handicapped child. But don't charge it to education. We are expected to do so much for so many. . . . We have kids coming out of such horrible situations when they reach the schoolhouse that really you and I don't know. The students—and what some parents expect the schools to do and what the state says you must do. . . . I don't think they realize the limitations of a school system to deal with all of this stuff. And yet they say our educational system, our test scores are going down. Well, yes, [they're] going down but look at the broad area that a school system is charged with. . . . It's a lot when you really analyze it . . . providing the services [a county] must provide. But it's here and it's real and we've got to do the best that we can.

Board work presents a problematic reality: a public that demands and misunderstands; a legislature that controls and constrains them; and a complex and cumbersome system that confounds them. Newly elected school board members soon realize that even their seemingly simple goals and hopes for accomplishments will be difficult to achieve. They feel alienated, powerless, discouraged, disappointed, and frustrated.

Struggling with Reality

As newly elected board members confront the problems that collide with their expectations, they struggle to adapt and respond to these problems. The expert-perspective literature confirms at least one aspect of what board members discover: that board work is difficult and its duties are comprehensive. Rosenberg (1993) stated:

[Board work] is subject to local pressures, state and federal mandates [and] can consume up to 40 hours of personal time every week. . . . [The work] requires the knowledge of five Ph.D.s, the personal qualities of a diplomat, team skills of an NFL champion [and] . . . the ability to perform flawlessly in public. (p. 6)

Ferrell (1997) also commented on the complexity of the board role, "The duties and responsibilities of superintendents and school board members are so numerous, so diverse, and so varied that it would be impossible to thoroughly cover this subject without practically writing a textbook" (p. 1).

A board member's initial adjustment period demands a cautious approach: learning what they need to know while avoiding mistakes and finding ways to anticipate and avoid conflict. Adjusting to their reality means making the work more doable. Board members, regardless of their experience level, acknowledged the importance of these adjustments, of learning the "do's and don'ts."

“For a few years or months you’re warming up, you’re learning the ropes, you’re learning the do’s and the don’ts and the short cuts.”

“Even if you know the rules you can . . . make a fool out of yourself quick. . . . But it’s worse if you don’t [know the rules].”

“You’ve got to have advisors. If you think you don’t have [to], then you’re gonna make mistakes.”

“You need to listen . . . to people [who have knowledge]. If you think you have all the answers before you get started—you’re in trouble.”

“As a new board member, you have four years to convince the people that you need to be there. The first year . . . don’t do a lot of talking. Do a lot of looking and listening because you can get yourself in a lot of trouble.”

Board members sometimes seek assistance from the Florida School Board Association (FSBA).

“Any board members coming on board needs to get all the training they can from the state level.”

“When I first became a member of the school board I attended the workshops they have where they actually groom you.”

When we go to our meetings with our association they’re constantly giving us new, updated material. I try to go by that pretty much. . . . The workshops in Tallahassee [and] the state association meeting in Tampa are the major [ways to learn about your job].

Unfortunately, [said one newly-elected board member] I was overwhelmed by the FSBA new-board-member orientation. The thing that really overwhelmed me was, whew! We went to an orientation meeting in Tallahassee and they just threw so much at us. A lot of it was in the area of law and that’s very difficult for anybody to understand even if you’re a lawyer. Someone there described it like this, “It’s kind of like trying to take a drink of water at a fire hydrant. There’s just

so much going by. You could just get a little bit of it here and a little bit here and that's about it. The rest of it's gone." There's no way you can get all of it.

Another more experienced board member attending the new-board-member orientation said, "If I was a new board member right now I would be totally lost!"

Board members also seek local expertise in the form of advice from current and previous school board members. One new board member said she watched previous sitting boards, "seeing how [they] act and react actually." Another said,

You gain experience through other people's experience. If you need quick experience that's the best way to get it. The board member I replaced—I go talk to him a lot of times. He was very knowledgeable of the school system. Served as chairman for 10 years. He knew the ropes. I talk to him quite a bit. He knows, he's been there, he knows the school board policy and laws and he can give you good advice.

As the following comments indicate, however, most board members plod along viewing on-the-job experience as their best teacher.

"The school of hard knocks: I'll say that's the only way you can learn."

"There's nothing that can substitute for experience. I don't know how else you learn to be a school board member unless you're a school board member. That's just the onliest way to do it."

"I was trying to prepare myself but that's something you just don't do 'til you get there. You don't learn how to ride a bike until you get on it."

School board members struggle to learn what they need to know, to make the work doable in spite of their problematic day-to-day realities, and to become effective. One trainer told new board members that effectiveness requires more than a desire to accomplish their goals, "You have ideals, commitment, and energy. But that will not make you effective."

Trainers tell board members that effectiveness depends upon them becoming part of a team, “working with” the superintendent and other board members. Board members agree upon the importance of relationships.

“You have to deal with all of the people . . . you have to have a fairly good relationship with the superintendent, the other board members, with your constituents.”

“You need a good relationship with the superintendent. . . . You definitely need a good relationship with the superintendent.”

You’re just one school board member, and you may be enthusiastic about something, but if you can’t sell that enthusiasm to somebody else its not gonna amount to a hill of beans. . . . I’ve seen a lot of enthusiasm just go to waste . . . because it was misdirected, you know. I might be very passionate in something I want to do, but . . . it’s just a one-man singing group.

Teamwork means board members can create a good public image as well. Trainers said, “Work with the superintendent not just to look good but to do good” and “When . . . the sun shines it shines on everyone. When good happens there is enough credit for all to share. . . . Always operate as a team.”

Conversely, trainers tell board members that the consequences of not working together as a team can be a bad public image and loss of election.

“When it rains, it rains on everyone. . . . Blame hits all.”

“If one board member drives home an issue in a non-friendly way at the board table, the press will say, ‘The board looks bad.’ They will not say, ‘[You] look bad.’ We are a team.”

“Boards that work with the superintendent generally get re-elected; if you don’t try to work together you will not last.”

Board members learn that turning their goals into accomplishments requires keeping the peace in critical relationships.

"If you're going to accomplish anything you have to listen. If I have any questions I call the school board office, I go by, they're open to me. . . . I've still got that relationship—and that's the only way you can accomplish anything."

"You need a good relationship with other board members. You can't get anything done with one—you need three."

"I got a good relationship with the principals. I got a good relationship with the staff. And I think that's your support. If your staff don't like you you're not gonna be there."

"If you alienate people then you can't get anything accomplished."

One board member gave an example of how good relationships help get things done and how poor relationships threaten accomplishments.

It helps to have a good relationship with everyone—all personnel, teachers [and] administrative staff. . . . I like to think I get things done a little quicker when I approach administrative staff. I work better with them than some of the other board members [do]. [I might say to staff], . . . "I know you're behind in your grass cutting but it's sure looking shabby over in this part of the county. When are we gonna get to it?" [Then they will say], "Well we weren't gonna get it until Thursday but we'll go ahead and get it on Tuesday." They do things like that, which I appreciate. We've had board members before who think that because they're board members, [everyone should] "hop hop." And then [the administration] pulls away from them and they don't get nearly as much accomplished. . . . You can't be demanding. You can't be demeaning. You can't be sarcastic. You can't be ridiculing. You can't call and say, "Look, this grass is two feet high and it has been like that for two weeks and I'm tired of it and I want it cut and I want it cut today." And they'd say, "Well, we'll get to it as soon as possible." But they'll get it Thursday when it's scheduled."

As board members struggle with their problematic reality they eventually learn how to make the work doable. One board member summed up what they learn about the nature of their work: "You need to know how to get along with people."

Making the Work Doable: Keeping the Peace

As board members struggle to accept their limiting reality and make their work more doable, they develop strategies to keep peace in their professional relationships. Slowly the dominant theme of their work becomes "keeping the peace." This theme has three implementing sub-themes: giving up, giving in, and giving over. Each sub-theme involves adjustment strategies that minimize conflict in board work: tamping down their goals and expectations for accomplishments, changing their view of the work, pacifying the public, and supporting the superintendent.

Giving Up

Keeping the peace means giving up undoable goals and notions of the work. New board members learn this quickly and experienced board members caution about the difficulties of failing to do so.

Some goals that board members hold prior to their first election are indeed unreasonable; other goals only become unreasonable within the context of their problematic reality. Either way, campaign promises that raise public expectations beyond board members' limiting reality create a dilemma.

[Board candidates] go around and they'll tell everybody, "I'm gonna fire that principal . . . and I'm gonna get rid of those teachers you don't like." . . . When [the public meets elected board members] on the street they say, "When you gonna kick that teacher out? When you gonna see about that principal getting fired?" . . . So all the sudden . . . [board members] found themselves in a dilemma.

Keeping peace with the public requires board members avoid such dilemmas and the loss of public confidence that comes with failure to deliver on their promises. Two board members warned:

"Don't make any promises that you know you're not going to be able to keep."

Don't ever say, "We're gonna do something" because you can't do it—you're only one person, one vote. If you made a statement that you can't back up, [the public] has lost all confidence in you. . . . You can't say you can do something—because you can't."

Keeping goals doable also curbs personal disappointment and helps board members keep peace with themselves—a psychological peace. "Don't go in there with any hard and specific things that you want to do. You don't go in there with a narrow focus . . . 'cause you're going to be disappointed."

Experienced board members carefully phrase their promises to be doable. The following goals reflect safe promises.

"To make a positive impact on education."

"To make a difference in our school system."

"To improve the schools."

"To get more computer equipment."

"To work together [with superintendent and staff] to have one of the best school systems."

"To do something to work with the system to help the children."

"To promote a better school system for the children."

"To be a spokesperson for the citizens of my district."

"To be visible."

Board members can fulfill a goal of "getting more computer equipment" by adding a few computers or a new lab for every school. They can "make a difference in our school system" by putting cell phones on buses.

Board members also learn that safe promises include goals that can be phrased to promise effort rather than results.

"To *try* [italics added] to improve education at the district level."

"To be part of a new administration and *hopefully* [italics added] make some changes and have a better school system."

"To keep my ear to the ground and *see if I could* [italics added] stay on top of things that need addressing."

"To *do the very best I could* [italics added] with the dollars we had to see that they were spent wisely."

"To be involved and put the time in that it takes and unselfishly serve and *try* [italics added] to contribute something to the system."

Perhaps the following board member best demonstrates how a carefully phrased goal becomes doable, having the potential to keep the political peace with the public and the psychological peace with his own thinking about his goals.

My goal was to help be a part of the system to make this school system better. We have an excellent school system and I wanted to be a part of the team to improve on that. . . . I would not commit myself to any specific thing. My sole purpose of running was to help children, to be able to *do something* [italics added] to work with the system to help the children.

When prodded to explain what this meant, he said,

I was not running to do anything except to promote, you know, a better school system for the children. We have a good school system in this county and I wanted to be a part of it to help make it better. . . . We'll work together: that was my goal.

Board members who avoid promising the public what they cannot deliver keep peace with the public. Keeping the peace also means they give up notions of the work that conflict with the limiting reality of their work. Giving up these notions provides board members a psychological peace about the work. Two experienced board members offered the following explanations:

First-time board members probably [have] an entirely different perspective of . . . their role as a school board member [than an experienced board member. New board members may have] a total lack of understanding of what their responsibilities are.

An awful lot of school board members . . . really don't understand the job that they're there to do. It's like they went in there with a preconceived idea of what a school board member was and they're operating on that. . . . They go in there with their own agendas. Their own thing to do really.

Changing their view of the work is critical to their ability to accomplish something. This adjusted view demands that they "just follow the process . . . of what it is they're supposed to be doing." Failure to make this change of view means they are "missing an opportunity to *do something good*"[italics added].

The first sub-theme of keeping the peace—giving up—means board members give up undoable goals and notions of the work and lower their expectations for accomplishments. The second sub-theme of keeping the peace is giving in.

Giving In

Board members know that no matter how unrealistic the public's expectations, how gross the public's misperceptions, how remote the public's demands are from important educational issues, a dissatisfied public that is unappreciative of and unfamiliar with a board's limiting reality can exert its power at the polls. Knowing this, a board member sometimes keeps peace with the public by giving in to public demands that the member knows are ill advised and uninformed.

When a large, vocal public contingency exerts its pressure, board members say it becomes nearly impossible to resist giving the public what it wants. One board member remembered observing a controversial issue at a board meeting before he was elected. He admitted how public pressure might have swayed his decision had he been on the board.

The first board meeting I attended was very controversial. It was whether we have a football program in the middle school. Believe it or not that was a big issue! I probably would have jumped on the train! Goodness! That place was full of people, all of them wanting it.

Another board member described how public pressure swayed his decision on an issue of consolidating schools. His county has five communities separated by considerable geographic space, each supporting its own community schools. He said he firmly believed that consolidating at least the high schools would direct money from operations to instruction, but he also knew that this controversial issue had a potential for great conflict. He explained his unwillingness to raise his concerns publicly.

If we looked at some consolidation we could certainly enhance the quality of education in [our] county. We're spending dollars on maintenance, maintenance, maintenance on many of our facilities that could be dollars spent in classrooms. But prior to my involvement on the school board, we had a board [that] tried [to discuss consolidation] and these communities went into total chaos. They had a meeting at the auditorium at each one of the high schools. In my 29 years of being in this community I've never seen that large a [crowd] gathered at one place. At that time [the superintendent] and board felt that that was the end of all of their political careers for even having the forums to discuss it. . . . The community continues to make board members aware that they are not the least bit interested in losing their local schoolhouse. . . . Doing the things that the citizen wants is sometimes difficult. I have a hard time with that when what the citizen wants is not fiscally responsible. [Yet] I have not gone openly and said, "I think we need to go for a vote for consolidation," although I know [we should]. . . . The problem is getting there. Political suicide. The first tremendous hurdle would be to get five individuals, or a majority of them that would commit to tackling that obstacle. . . . I think it would be a political nightmare for those who are politically concerned. You could probably feel certain that we would have a house cleaning.

Keeping peace means giving in to public demands and sometimes even avoiding open discussion of issues that threaten the peace. Another board member indicated,

Sports is good. I like to see a good ball game. But to me that's not nearly as important as it is to some other folks. There's a lot of money spent on sports and athletics. We spend too much money on sports in my opinion.

... I wish we could put more of that into the classroom. ... I wish we were as concerned about high IQ teams and science clubs [as we are about] the football team. But it doesn't happen and I don't fight it. ... I like a good ball game and I know it's helped individual students ... but ... I think too much emphasis is put on sports. And [to say that is] a good way to get out of office quick.

Sometimes, said one board member, it is just difficult to say no to the public.

Most of these people are your friends that you see every day and you're going to have to tell them no on some things because it's just not feasible. ... Or your beliefs may not coincide with [those of] the ... people that are asking you. It's easier to say no to someone you don't know.

Danzberger and Usdan (1992) agreed that surviving in board work means giving in to public demands. "Board members need not wonder about whether they are responsive to local needs, for they will find out at the polls" (p. 54).

Giving Over

The third sub-theme of the basic theme of board work is giving over. Keeping the peace means giving over the board's rank authority to the superintendent's professional authority: supporting the superintendent and his official recommendations and expectations regarding how board members should fill the school board role.

Researchers conclude that the superintendent and staff hold most of the power in school districts (Charters, 1953; Zeigler & Jennings, 1974). Board members, as several explained, understand this power.

Its statutory. If you read what a superintendent is empowered to do it is really awesome. He has a tremendous responsibility. And he's empowered by law to accomplish a good school program in this community. And when you read over those responsibilities that the superintendent has it's frightening, it's awesome.

"The superintendent is everyone's boss and probably influences a lot of people along the way, whether it be good or bad."

"The superintendent is the person who can make things happen. . . . By virtue of his position, he has that power."

"It's his system; it's his baby."

It's clear right in statute: the responsibilities of the school board and the responsibilities of the superintendent. We contract, we spend the money, we hire, we enter into agreements, and we make sure the school functions. In other words, we are responsible for making sure that everything is in place and the money is spent properly. But the catch to all that is that, although we vote on those things, what we're passing on is a recommendation from the superintendent. And he's going to bring us the recommendation that he wants. . . . He's the man with the power.

[Superintendents] have a board that adopts their budget. They have a board that adopts their policy. But they are responsible for the day-to-day operation of the school system. . . . I think a superintendent will make or break a county.

Although researchers document inherent conflict in the board-superintendent relationship (Dansberger & Usdan, 1992; Tallerico, 1989a), board members perceive that getting along with the person in this powerful position is critical to the success of board work. Board members perceive that legislative constraints on board power—viz., an elected superintendency as opposed to an appointed one—enhance a superintendent's power and create additional potential conflict in a relationship already prone to conflict. They noted that elected superintendents may ignore board directives. Two board members described this predicament:

"I've served with some supers in the past who won't implement what the board directs. . . . How do you beat that?"

"I thought, 'Motion. Action. Done.' Not necessarily. Things just sort of don't get done, you know?"

Experienced board members, speaking to a group of new board members at a Florida School Board Association training session, confirm this assessment.

If you have an appointed superintendent, [then superintendent selection] is a big piece of the [school board's] job. If you are in a district that elects its superintendent, then a big piece is to figure out politically how to get along with that person.

Appointed superintendents are more amenable to do what the board wants to do, when the board wants to do it. An elected superintendent can put the board off a little bit longer and really, truth be known, he does not have to implement [what the board demands]. You can keep beating him up at board meetings, but until next election not much can be done.

To maintain peace with a person in a powerful position who can ignore their policy directives, board members give over support to superintendent recommendations and decisions. Superintendents often expect such behavior. Board members said that getting along with the superintendent and staff means going along with their decisions.

"Your superintendent and the principals—all your department heads—have to understand that you will back them when they make decisions."

"[The superintendent] takes it very personally . . . when we don't go along with everything he wants to happen."

Another agreed, describing a scenario in which her failure to give over her support to his recommendation damaged their relationship.

The superintendent had recommended a person for a position, but the person did not meet the qualifications on the job description that the board had previously approved. Therefore, the superintendent was also recommending that the job description be changed so that the qualifications were lowered so that the person he was recommending would meet the qualifications. The board member voiced her concerns to the superintendent privately, before the public meeting, as he always encouraged her to do with any questions about his recommendations. She said the superintendent tried to convince her to trust his recommendation and approve the lowered qualifications. He said, "Couldn't you trust me that certainly I would have . . . hired the best possible candidate?"

The superintendent was unwilling to change his recommendation based on their discussion and she was unwilling to support the existing recommendation, so she questioned his decision at a public board meeting. The board agreed with her and failed to support the superintendent's recommendation. She says her failure to give over support to the superintendent's recommendation and the public discussion that resulted in the rest of the board not giving over their support to the recommendation damaged her relationship with the superintendent. "He didn't like that. . . . It became a personal issue."

Giving over discretion to superintendents makes sense to most board members due to system complexity and board members' own lack of time, information, and expertise. Giving over can provide board members with peace of mind about their myriad responsibilities. Two board members described their reasoning:

This system has gotten much more complex over the last 10 years. . . . Most all of us [on the board] are professionals. . . . I have a full-time profession outside of [board work] . . . and so my time is limited. . . . I've grown to recognize the fact that basically it's going to be that way . . . it's not all bad. The end result may provide for a much better system. . . . I personally think that our administrators and our people in leadership roles should be much more qualified than [board members] and abreast of the kinds of changes and the things we need to be doing and pursuing to improve our educational process.

You listen real, real, real close to those people [with experience]. For instance, the deputy superintendent—he has 25 or 26 years [experience]. . . . I [have] a lot of confidence in him. So if I see a major deal coming up I go to him and say, "Tell me what you think about this" and I listen to him. And 99% of the time I take his advice.

Besides the expectation of giving over support to superintendent recommendations, board members are encouraged to give over discussion of issues to the private arena and forego public discussion in the boardroom. One researcher who studied school board work found just that, that board work is largely invisible to the public

because much of it takes place in private spaces rather than in the public square (Tallerico, 1989b). “A good deal of study, discussion, bargaining and compromise takes place before a problem or issue appears on the public agenda. Behind the scenes, board members and superintendents use informal communication networks to negotiate their education agenda” (p. 26).

Board members said superintendents encourage them to discuss concerns with them privately rather than in public meetings. “[The superintendent] always says, ‘Don’t surprise me now—don’t surprise us.’ [He expects you to] go to him before the meeting and say ‘I’m not gonna be for that.’”

When controversial issues arise in the boardroom, board members squelch potential conflict by refusing to enter into public discussion. In one board meeting a parent came to ask the board to discipline the superintendent, who had been arrested during school hours for DUI. The parent wondered how the board could allow the school leader to enforce zero tolerance policies for students and not hold employees to the same standards. Board members sat motionless as the board chairman read the following prepared statement:

Mr. [X] has served [this] county well for 28 years as principal, assistant principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. He has also been a viable part of his community and church. But that isn’t the issue today. As the school board of [this] county, we have no authority over a constitutionally elected official such as the superintendent. However, if he were assistant superintendent or any other faculty member, upon conviction, he would be terminated. Since the school board cannot discuss any school business except in open meetings, I would invite any questions or comments by other board members. If not, I suggest we move on to our regular agenda.

The other board members remained silent. One sat with eyes cast downward while she nervously munched peanuts. The board chairman spoke again, saying

additional discussion “would be inadvisable” since the school board lacked authority to take action in this matter. He moved adjournment, the motion was seconded, and a swift unanimous vote ended the potential for further conflict. The parent left without answers, board discussion, or board action.

Although the board chair invited board communication, the board chose not to use this opportunity to discuss the origins of the board’s powerlessness—viz., the elected superintendency—and the public’s power to change the system to an appointed superintendency by means of a referendum. Rather, the board chose to eliminate the possibility for further public conflict, which could have damaged the board-superintendent relationship.

A board member explained how public discussion can damage relationships and how private discussion can keep the peace.

I don’t believe in washing someone’s laundry in the open, out in the public. As a team member that’s not what I’m supposed to be doing. I don’t air the laundry out. We can deal with [issues] before we go into the board meeting. . . . That way, when I get into an open board meeting I don’t make myself or the person with the issue on the agenda look like a fool . . . and I can continue to have their respectful, working relationship. . . . I’m not here to make people look bad or to embarrass them. So if I have a question or a problem with something, I get that taken care of before I go into the meeting.

Maintaining Balance

Board members keep peace with the public and with the superintendent by giving up undoable goals and notions of the work, by giving in to public demands, by giving over their support to superintendent recommendations, and by giving over discussion to the private arena. Giving in, giving up, and giving over are sub-themes that implement the basic cultural theme of board work, which is keeping the peace. Keeping the peace

also requires that board members maintain a balance among the sub-themes. Too much of any of these sub-themes also threatens the peace.

Giving up too much. Board members give up their original goals for more doable goals and give up their preconceived notions of the work for a more doable view that reflects their limiting reality. When board members feel so constrained by the limits that they give up too much on their goals, they find an ulterior motive for serving on the board: the money and benefits that accompany the board position. However, it is unlikely that board members with such an ulterior motive would admit it.

A lot of times in my community . . . instead of the [school board member] being qualified, it's the person who really needs the job [who gets elected]. . . . But when you talk to them are they gonna tell you that? No, they're gonna tell you that "I'm a child advocate." . . . So sometimes you have to read between the lines of what they told you and what they're really there for.

One board member explained his belief that money motivates many board members other than himself:

Greg: Believe me, Janet, I am not there for the little bit of money that we make. Because if you base that per hour I could go pump gas at a filling station and make more money. Honestly. There's a lot of hours put in by board members.

Janet: In your experience of watching boards, seeing board members come and go, do you think that some board members do it for the money?

Greg: Yeah. Yeah. I sure do. Insurance. Money. Retirement. Yeah.

Janet: How big of a draw do you think that it is?

Greg: Fifty percent. . . . I think 50% of the board members that I've known do it for the money. I really do.

Another board member thought that those motivated by the salary and benefits exhibit diminished performance. "Sure there's people who are entranced by that dollar

amount, and it's apparent in their performance. They're a figurehead. They're present. They have very little input. Very little questions." Yet another said, "I think sometimes we'd have better school boards if we didn't pay 'em."

One school board member described the frustration he feels when the public assumes that boards are driven by monetary benefits. "We hear all the time, 'All you guys care about is the paycheck.' You get a little punchy about that. You get a little sore and you want to reach out and say, 'Hey, look, Jack! See that new gymnasium, classrooms, buses?' "

Yet another said that, because much board work takes place outside of public view, the public simply fails to understand how much work board members do. "The public don't see a lot of [what you do behind the scenes.] They probably think you don't earn your money. . . . They say that all the time."

Salary and benefits as motivations make sense given the limited economic opportunities in rural districts. Districts are poor and board members make relatively good salaries. The legislatively established board member salary (Florida County Rankings 2001a) substantially exceeds the per capita personal income in each district (Florida County Rankings 2001b). Poverty levels in each district also exceed the state average (Florida Statistical Abstract 2001b).

Needham (1992) reports that most states pay no salary, and Florida's annual salary and benefits package for its school board members is the highest in the nation. His survey research found that, nationwide, school-board-member compensation ranged from \$100 to Florida's \$22,968 and varied by region. The South Atlantic region averaged \$11,752 (skewed by Florida's high annual salary), while the East North Central averaged

\$2,007. He found that 32 states had statutes allowing some form of payment, but that only Florida legislatively mandated a salary. Needham, observing also that paid board members served for slightly longer terms, concluded, "It's likely [that board members] see compensation as incentive to remain on the school board" (p. 40).

Board members must not only avoid giving up too much, they must also maintain a critical balance between giving in and giving over. Too much giving in and not enough giving over can alienate the superintendent. Too much giving over and not enough giving in pleases a superintendent but can alienate the public. Board members can find themselves caught between two conflicts, unable to keep peace in both camps.

Giving in too much. Keeping the peace involves giving in to public demands, but board members must guard against giving in too much. Such behavior can alienate the superintendent, but most often, board members say that giving in too much results in getting "run ragged," "tired out," or becoming "callous." Board members describe how this happens and how they respond.

I was new and I guess gullible and was trusting and anything that anybody told me, if they had a problem I went to bat. It didn't take long before I saw that I was getting myself run ragged on every little thing. . . . I tried to help some and found myself being used more than anything else. I would go the extra mile to help someone and have it be me giving an inch and then they would want the mile next. . . . And I found myself being abused.

This board member's response to this "abuse" was to seek insulation from the public's demands.

In a small community, a lot of the people tend to think of you as a person to solve their problems no matter how small it is. . . . So I just decided I was going to screen this stuff. . . . I started using our system and those people that was in positions could give them answers. . . . I was directing [people with problems] back to the principals at the school or to some other administrator that could help. . . . So it isn't so much that I've shut

myself off from [the public's problems]; I just became wiser in how to handle things.

Another board member, speaking about four board members who had averaged 12 years' experience among them, explained how getting "tired out" can mean they stop being accessible. "You know why they wasn't on campus? They were tired out. They was tired. They didn't want to go on campus. All you hear when you go on campus is problems."

He worries that the same thing could happen to him and tells how he protects against this.

The last year has been a lot of problems. A lot of little problems that I don't think I could stand for 16 years. I don't know if I can take that. Not like last year has been. . . . I think board members can burn out, I really do. I think you can only take so much of it—like any job. You say, "Oh that's not a big thing to deal with—let's let it go." . . . Thank goodness I had a good, experienced board that . . . told me what to do. They said, "Now you're gonna get a lot of calls and people's gonna try to get you in the middle of things and get you to go to the principal and all this, so your best response is, 'Hey, have you not contacted the teacher? . . . How about the principal?'" In other words, go through the chain of command. And try to keep yourself away from it." . . . We should be out of it.

Another board member describes himself as becoming "callous."

I think I'm a little more callous than I was. . . . I don't think I'm as sensitive to some of my constituency as I once was. I've heard their complaints so many times over and over and over. And they don't seem to change. And they're just unfounded. . . . I sometimes find I'm not paying as astute attention as I should to those people who are constantly raking me over the coals. I do say they have a part and they're good but you do get tired of it.

He dreads being accessible, finds it difficult to be responsive, and no longer engages the public in discussion of the issue at hand.

It's not right to tune it out. Listen, respond, and go off. Then next time listen, respond, and go off. Sometimes I see them coming and I think, "Oh no, what is it this time?" . . . I listen. I think I'm still responsive but I tried

to educate them to the point that they would see it my way. Now I don't bother. I just think, "Nah. If it's not right, we're not gonna do it that way."

Giving over too much. Board members give over support to superintendent recommendations and give over discussion to the private arena. Board members who give over too much can alienate the public. Too much giving over, rubber-stamping recommendations and decisions of the superintendent at the expense of responsiveness to public demands, happens when board members tire of accessibility and responsiveness, becoming insensitive to constituent demands. One board member stated, "A board that's been there for years and years ... might get in a rut.... A lot of times a lot of things were just being stamped, rubber-stamped."

Asked to describe "rubber-stamp boards" another board member explained,

[They] approved everything that came across the desk with no questions. The superintendent and staff formulated everything to do with education in [this] county and the board said [she makes head-bobbing movements while she speaks], "That's good, that's good, that's good."

Board members must give up, give in, and give over and maintain a balance among these implementing sub-themes of the basic theme of board work—keeping the political peace and their own peace of mind. This is the nature of board work.

Beyond Keeping the Peace

The problematic reality that board work presents—a public that demands and misunderstands, a legislature that controls and constrains, and a complex system that frustrates and intimidates board members—makes school board work problematic. Board members struggle to find ways to make their work more doable. They learn that the nature of the work is keeping the peace: giving up on their undoable goals and preconceived notions of the work; giving in to public demands; giving over support to

superintendent recommendations; giving over discussion to the private arena; and maintaining a balance among these implementing sub-themes of the basic cultural theme of board work, keeping the peace.

What lies beyond this peace? Do board members who master the goal of keeping the peace recount significant accomplishments or perceptions of effectiveness? Or does keeping the peace become the nature of the work and the result of the work?

Accomplishments

School board members struggle to define their accomplishments, to view their efforts as worthwhile, and to explain their effectiveness. The adjustments that board members made to make the work doable—to keep the peace—produce difficulties for them when they are asked to delineate their specific accomplishments. What they consider as accomplishments lack specificity, reflecting the adjustments they made to make the work doable. Several board members described their accomplishments in terms of efforts put forth, reflecting their tamped-down goals and indicating that persevering is, in itself, an accomplishment.

We are constantly aware of test scores and *trying* [italics added] to improve. . . . We *try* [italics added] to maintain a quality education for all parts of the county and we *try* [italics added] to treat our personnel the very best we can with the resources that we have. . . . We've *tried* [italics added] to provide facilities . . . we've *tried* [italics added] to maintain a good level of control over students.

You know that you can't do all that you want to do, and you can't please all the people all the time, but the confidence that people place in you sure will make you *try* [italics added]. . . . [I] put the time in that it takes and unselfishly serve and *try* [italics added] to contribute something to the system.

You just gotta keep *trying* [italics added] and realize that everything is a battle and not the war. You can lose a battle and still win the war. Just keep going.

Persevering—keeping going—requires that board members maintain hope that the time and effort they have invested will yield positive results. Straining for psychological peace, one board member acknowledged his board's lack of "major accomplishments," but told how he likes to think about the work he has done. "Great accomplishments? . . . I'm sorry I can't tell you some of the major accomplishments that we had. *I like to think* [italics added] I've given back something." Two other board members reach for the same peace of mind, to keep up hope of making a contribution.

I wanted to make my mark, so to speak, and do what I thought I could and should do. I'm not finished. I don't know where it'll take me. I think we're called upon to do what it is we're supposed to do. And I think I'm doing that. *I hope* [italics added] I am.

I certainly *hope* [italics added] that we've improved upon the quality . . . of education over the last nine years. *I want to think* [italics added] there have been some positive things from me serving on the board. I want to *hope* [italics added] that . . . we continue to provide quality education.

Other board member descriptions of accomplishments are equally vague. "Some of [my goals] are still in the works and some of them are still in progress. . . . It's evolving. It's a work in progress. It's never complete."

Although board members try to maintain hope and, therefore, a psychological peace about the worth of their efforts, one board member bluntly articulated doubts about the importance of what board members do.

Sometimes I wonder, "Do we really need school boards?" . . . You know that's basically what we do is approve things that people bring to us. [Boards] are needed in the sense that somebody's got to give approval to all this you see. I guess that's our basic function. That doesn't seem like that much of an important role, really, but it's one that's necessary I guess.

Board member accomplishments can be nebulous. They are about putting forth effort, keeping up hope, and maintaining the psychological peace that enables them to keep on with the work.

Effectiveness

Board member explanations of effectiveness parallel the tentative nature of board member accomplishments. Perhaps one board member best captures the flexible nature of school-board-member effectiveness, doing what they can and what they need to do to survive.

There really isn't one specific thing that a person would have to be in order to be an effective board member . . . [it] varies according to what we're doing and how we're able to exist . . . that makes the job workable and doable.

Substituting the word "success" for "effectiveness," board members said that success is doing their best—doing what they can within the limits of their reality. When board member accomplishments are about putting forth effort, keeping up hope, and maintaining the psychological peace that enables them to keep on with the work, and when success and effectiveness mean doing what you can, and keeping the peace is what you can do, then effectiveness means keeping the peace.

Personal success is that I feel like I've done the right thing and the best job that I possibly can do with what I have to do with. If you do everything you can—everything within your power . . . then you have to be satisfied with that and say, "Hey, that's success."

[Success is] to know that you can at least look yourself in the mirror and say, "I've done what I thought was right, the very best I could for the system, the kids."

Board members ultimately consider re-election, especially without an opponent, as a sign of their effectiveness. "You're doing a good job within your district when you

don't have opposition.... The greatest compliment to the job you've done is running unopposed."

Failing to Keep the Peace

Board members who fail to keep the peace, thus becoming ineffective board members, are constantly aware that they risk losing their position. Several board members described their vulnerability:

"You do things when you're a board member that don't always endear you to people."

"We're cutting out positions because we've got to . . . be more frugal. That's not [as] popular . . . [as] adding people and jobs. I have no idea of how that's going to translate at the polls. It can't be too good."

"We had probably one of the most qualified [board members] . . . defeated . . . because . . . she didn't support something to do with athletics in middle school. That hurt her. It happened just before the election. People got down on her for that."

An incumbent is probably easier to defeat than somebody just running for the office no matter how good a job they did. The incumbent has to stick to the truth. The candidate can make anything up. They can rule the world and say they will do anything until they get here and find out what the rules and regulations and restrictions are that they have to conform to.

The teachers are watching. They're listening. They know what their needs are. If you're not responsive, if you don't know about the issue, they'll ask, "What are you doing? You need to find out about this." And you'd better find out about it and get back to them. . . . We employ over 600 employees in this school district and there's only 12,000 to 13,000 registered Democrats and there's only 3,000 to 4,000 registered Republicans. And they all have spouses. Six or seven hundred employees and I'll guarantee you that them and their spouses go out and vote. So if there's a 50% turnout, we're only talking about 6000 Democrats, 6000 votes cast. Fourteen hundred of them or 25 % are gonna be employees of this school district. That's the way I look at it. . . . Educated people go

vote. Government employees go vote. The largest voting block in [this] county is government and school employees.

Regardless of the instability of their position, board members want to avoid losing elections for several reasons. First, board members who serve for the salary and fringe benefits do not want to lose an election because it means the loss of these financial benefits. Second, losing an election means board members lose the opportunity to try to accomplish “something good” for their schools. Two board members described this opportunity.

“A board member at least has the opportunity to get involved in anything they want in the district whether or not they can solve it.”

“I might as well be part of the process where the board and superintendent are nurturing and providing support where the systems in our district can function.”

Finally, because board members believe that winning an election means winning the public’s confidence, losing an election would mean losing the public trust and their personal identity as an effective school board member. Two board members pondered how disappointing a loss could be.

If I think that I can’t win, I’ll quit running. I never had to get up in the morning and say, “Well, I lost the election.” I don’t know how I would handle it. I am sure that there would be disappointment, possibly some bitterness.

I’d have to give it real careful consideration at the end of this term as far as running again—whether or not I think I can get re-elected. . . . If I didn’t have opposition I might stay on but I don’t think it will happen so I’ll probably step aside. I could join the ranks of undefeated politicians and say, “Well, I could have it back if I wanted it.” That’s maybe fooling myself but it’s better than saying, “There’s no point in running: I’m gonna get beat.”

Failing to keep the peace means risking not being re-elected. Failing to maintain peace of mind means losing hope and therefore losing the will to continue to try to "do something good."

Keeping the peace makes difficult work in problematic conditions more doable. It insulates board members from additional stress. Yet, in spite of their efforts to keep the peace, board work takes a personal toll on board members. Many board members spoke about the price of public service:

"My wife doesn't want me to run. My children don't want me to run."

There are many things that cannot be done. There are mandates that we have to live with. . . . There are things that we don't have control of. That's an awful hard thing to deal with. [Sometimes I wonder], 'Why am I doing this with everything else that I've got?'

[School board work] will definitely change your life forever. It's not an easy task. You have to be very committed and you gotta realize you're gonna lose some friendships over it. I would have a lot more friends had I not run for school board. Now I'm not saying I got a lot of enemies—but I got a lot of people out there that don't think as much of me now as they did. Because why? Because something we did caused a direct impact on them and their kid.

There are going to be those continuous calls you're going to get. Those night calls. . . . You're going to be confronted when you go to church; you're going to be confronted. In this situation you can pretty much rest assured that at any given time, regardless of where you're at, you're going to be confronted and asked to explain why or what reason.

I have had to deal with [situations] . . . that I preferred not to but I didn't have a choice. . . . I don't think [school board work] is meant for everybody. . . . You've got to be willing give of yourself and take the criticism, take the punches, hopefully learn from your mistakes, recognize and admit your mistakes.

It's probably the toughest job in America. I've had some tough jobs. It's very tough, if you take that job seriously, simply because there's gonna be issues that you're gonna be on the side of that you're gonna have a whole lot of opposition to and it's really not a fun job in a lot of respects.

You know your personal life weighs big in this stuff, I don't care what anybody says. Once you get out there—there's a little bit of fear there because anything you do—and people's gonna make mistakes, you know, some bigger than others—you just don't want everybody knowing about all your business. But they do know, and there's nothing you're going to do about it. You got to accept that. It's the old saying, you live in a glass house. Now if you don't want to live in that glass house, don't get in it, you know?

Salary-wise I have to have another job to support my family. So its kind of a secondary thing and its getting to the point it's just about full time. It is. There's very few nights I don't spend my nights on the phone. This past year there's probably two nights out of the week that I'm not talking some kind of school problem."

My kids, you know, they don't like me being on the board, neither one of them. They don't like it and I think they take a certain amount of abuse. My daughter, for instance, is very athletic. She loves to play all sports. She makes the teams. Would she make them teams if I wasn't a board member? That's what other people says. I think she would. I think she's good enough to play. But who knows? Maybe there are some influences there. I've never went up and—I would never do that. But she hears that stuff and she resents it. So that hurts. So there's some sacrifice. There's some sacrifice.

[A] principal that was not hired back—he lives across the street from me. I respected him and his wife. She was a teacher. And you know they were people who when they got in the car and went to work they spoke to me, you know? I'm sensitive to people's feelings and to be honest it bothers me. . . . I don't think there's anyone who can be completely insensitive to this kind of thing.

Let me tell you, it is tough when you sit [in expulsion hearings] and the parent sits across that desk and is crying, weeping, begging for you to keep their student in school. That is hard. That is very hard, you know? It's so tough that it'll make you lay there at night and wonder if you had to [expel that student].

One school board member summed up school-board work as follows: "It's a thankless task, I'll tell you. It really is. It's a thankless task."

Summary

In this chapter, I presented school board member voices describing their pre-election goals and post-election reality. I discussed the problems that confront school board members and influence their behaviors. I described their struggles to make the work doable, to cite accomplishments, and to define effectiveness. I traced subtle changes in school board members' thinking from the time they contemplate running for office, through learning the ropes of their new work, through their adjustments to the unanticipated realities of their work, and on to the decision to run again or leave the school board.

I proposed and explicated a grounded theory of board work. I showed that keeping the peace is a main cultural theme of school board work. This basic theme has several implementing sub-themes that explain board work: giving up, giving in, and giving over. I explained how board members who implement and balance these sub-themes keep the political peace within the school district and district offices and their own psychological peace about their explanations of the work. Those who fail to keep the peace risk not being re-elected, thus loss of opportunity. Ironically, keeping the peace can become board accomplishments and board effectiveness. Although board members hope that keeping the peace will help them accomplish needed changes in the system, in reality the practices transform them from supporters of change to supporters of the status quo.

In Chapter 4, I continue with my analysis of this grounded theory. I explore tenets of bureaucracy and democracy and explain how board member perceptions predominantly reflect bureaucratic ways of thinking about the work. I describe how formal training sessions embody and reinforce bureaucratic tenets. I argue that these perceptions are diametrically opposed to tenets of the democratic governance model.

In Chapter 5, I conclude that the best-practices orthodoxy fails as a theory of effective governance—its promise remaining unfulfilled. I examine why the basic cultural theme of school board work is keeping the peace. Following the creed promoted by the best-practices orthodoxy results in neither district school-system control nor in effective governance, but rather in peace at the price of democratic ideals.

Things go on rather peaceably even though you may be dealing with some very important things. (Anonymous school board member)

CHAPTER 4 THE DILEMMA: TO KEEP THE PEACE OR TO KEEP THE FAITH

Overview

In Chapter 3, I detailed a grounded theory of board work around the theme of keeping the peace. The theory explains subtle changes in school board members' thinking from the time they contemplate running for office, through gaining office, learning the ropes of their new work, adjusting to the unanticipated realities of that work, and deciding to run again or leave the school board. I found that most board members *give up* their original goals, lowering their achievement expectations; they *give in* to a critical and demanding public; and they *give over* support to the superintendent. The basic cultural theme of board work becomes keeping the peace.

In this chapter, I have constructed two conceptual characters, Fred and Laura. These sociological "ideal types" (Weber, 1976/1946, p. 59) incorporate typical behaviors and typical beliefs of board members. These beliefs, what Schutz and Luckmann (1973, p. 76) call "relevance structures," influence board members' behaviors.

The typical experiences and typical characteristics of all board member participants are synthesized into the two distinct ideal governance types presented in this chapter, the corporate-bureaucratic and the democratic. Fred and Laura reflect the beliefs and the behaviors compelled by those beliefs, of two board member types: one who follows the best practices of the corporate-bureaucratic governance model and another who attempts to follow democratic practices of the democratic governance model.

Through the use of ideal types, I describe the formal training that board members receive and how the messages they get from that training reinforce the peacekeeping theme. I examine the tension between a corporate-bureaucratic governance model and a democratic governance model, noting that the two models are diametrically opposed to one another. I describe how the tension created by this juxtaposition of principles creates a dilemma for board members who are guided by the democratic ideal. I argue that board members who follow the best practices promoted in training “keep the peace” and, wittingly or not, maintain the status quo. Board members who fail to follow best practices, disturb their own psychological peace, the district peace, and also face uncertain accomplishments. Fred and Laura help the reader understand the board members’ dilemma of keeping the peace or keeping faith in the democratic ideal.

Two Competing Models of Governance

The Corporate-Bureaucratic Governance Model

The bureaucratic educational structure, born during the Progressive Reform Movement of the early twentieth century, grew to maturity throughout the century. Today, public education institutions exhibit all the characteristics that Max Weber (1976/1946) first identified as central to bureaucratic work: they are orderly, hierarchical organizations run by full-time staffs; all positions within the organization are described, skills for each job are specified, and those who fill those positions are expected to be competent; a formal system of rules, regulations, and procedures promise to guide system actions; and a chain of command clarifies the levels of authority within the organization and guides organizational communication.

Professional administrative organizations promote the corporate-bureaucratic governance model. A publication of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (1996) summed up the directive that guides school board governance: "Boards of education will essentially follow the model of corporate boards in business and industry (p. 74)."

Best practices: keeping the peace. Fred is a board member who has mastered board work according to best practices of the corporate-bureaucratic governance model. Many of Fred's co-workers and friends from church encouraged him to run for the board seat. Fred had majored in education and even taught and coached for a year before moving into the banking business. Since leaving the school system, he served as a volunteer on the high school booster club. Fred hoped that his education and business expertise would make him an effective board member. He planned to make improvements in what he thought was an already good educational system.

When he won the election, Fred was determined to do his work well. "All these people said, 'I trust you. I think you can help,'" he said. "I'm not going to let them down." If he performed well on the job, Fred expected that the public would affirm this trust and re-elect him, perhaps without opposition. "You have four years to convince the people that you need to be there," he explained.

As Fred began working toward his goals, the complex system he confronted surprised and frustrated him. He had hoped to increase teacher salaries so that the district could attract more qualified teachers. He also hoped to direct a larger proportion of tax dollars to the classroom so that teachers would have the resources they needed to raise scores on standardized achievement tests. But these improvements eluded him. For

example, Fred thought that he could address the districts' need for better facilities by convincing his local legislator of the districts' need for more state funding. Unfortunately, he found this solution futile. The legislator, reported Fred, sat across the table from him and placed the responsibility back on the district.

I'm trying to help you, but [when I'm in Tallahassee trying to get money for your facilities] those south Florida guys [say to me] 'Don't cry to us. Those people in [that] county . . . have 5200 students and they elect to put them in 11 different school facilities.' You know, [Fred], be realistic . . . buckle up. Do what some of the other rural counties have done. Have one county high school [instead of three] and [then] you have three times the resources.

Fred knows that money is scarce; that small schools are more expensive to operate than larger schools, and that money spent on building and maintenance takes away from money the district could spend in the classroom. "We're spending dollars on maintenance, maintenance, maintenance on many of our facilities that could be dollars spent in classrooms." He faults the public for their unwillingness to support consolidation. "The community . . . [is] not the least bit interested in losing [neighborhood high schools]." He laments that the public places more importance on community high schools and their traditional sports rivalries than on the importance of academics.

[The public's] number one priority is the sports program. [When I mention consolidation parents say,] "We won't have [the old] football teams anymore." They are important to those communities. It's unbelievable the change [football] makes in those communities. All of the sudden the community has unity and that's where they're at on Friday night. Sports are a big, big part of it. There's no question about that. . . . I think too much emphasis is put on sports. There's a lot of money spent on sports and athletics. . . . And [to say] that is a good way to get out of office quick.

Fred thinks it is futile to pursue high school consolidation. All of the board members know how strongly the public feels. He calls it, "political suicide . . . a political nightmare." You could be sure, he says, "we would have a [political] house cleaning."

Fred realizes that consolidation would save money that the district could redirect to academic programs and he is frustrated that the public does not understand the fiscal problems facing the board or the academic consequences of their demands. "I have a hard time . . . when what the citizens want is not fiscally responsible." He does not see any advantage, however, in trying to educate the public on these issues.

Against his better judgment, Fred gives in to the public pressure, keeping the peace. The district's many monetary needs continue to plague the board and test scores stay low. Fred blames the legislature for their failure to provide enough money for the district's many needs.

[Money] . . . limits . . . what you can do. . . . If we can't get an increase out of the legislature, then it is hard to give raises, to lower your teacher student ratio, or build new [and needed] buildings. . . . I didn't realize that funding was as hard to come by as it [has turned out to be]. . . . We only have so many dollars. . . . [Legislatures] mandate programs, they mandate reports, they mandate studies—and they could care less where the revenue to carry it out will come from. It makes [board work] very stressful and demanding. . . . You live with constraints as a board member. . . . We are expected to do so much for so many. I don't think [anyone] realize[s] the limitations of a school system to deal with all of this stuff.

For Fred, the problems associated with a lack of money are rivaled only by the problem of his own lack of time to deal with the public's problems. For example, Fred thought he would be working mainly with big issues like school facilities and academic achievement, but discovered that citizen's concerns were on much narrower issues. Indeed, he admits to being "run ragged" by "picky little" demands.

In a small community, . . . people tend to think of [a board member] as a person to solve their problems no matter how small [they might be]. . . . All you hear [from people] is problems. . . . I don't know what it is the public wants, I really don't. I have a full-time profession outside of [board work] . . . and so my time is limited. . . . [I am] run ragged.

Feeling pressured by public expectations and misperceptions, powerless and alienated by legislative controls and constraints, and frustrated by a complex system that demands more time than he has to give, Fred realized how naïve he had been before his election. He struggled to learn how to do the work, avoid the pitfalls, and make the work doable.

[I was] naïve. Very naïve. I didn't know the ins and outs. I had a lot to learn. . . . I was naïve about some of the things I thought I could accomplish and how fast I thought I'd accomplish them. . . . I really didn't know what all was involved. . . . Something simple can be so complex in getting it done. . . . It is so complex. . . . You take a school budget. How many people [do] you think understand a school budget? It's so big in the first place, and if you're not a skilled person then it's hard for you to interpret that. . . . I can look at a lot of things and I have no clue. It's too broad. . . . Look at the broad area that a school system is charged with. . . . It's a lot when you really analyze it. . . . Being elected doesn't mean that you know . . . what you are elected to do. You have to learn it. I don't care . . . how much experience you have. Being on a board is different [from other work].

Fred reached out for expert advice and, at the suggestion of his district's superintendent, he attended the Florida School Board Association (FSBA) school board member orientation. Through training and on-the-job experiences, Fred learned to proceed cautiously.

Trainers offered a governance model that portrayed the school system as a large corporation and encouraged board members to work in ways that supported and legitimized the corporate-bureaucratic governance model. One trainer told board members, "You are the board of directors for a big business. . . . There is no right or

wrong way to run a school system, but there are some best practices [that can provide] a smooth running system [that] operate[s] efficiently.”

Trainers emphasized best practices strategies that would help board members maneuver the complex system, handle public pressures, and manage time. Comparing the importance of these strategies to the importance of headlights on a dark and bumpy road, one trainer warned, “You wouldn’t drive on a road full of potholes with your lights off. [The lights] help you not get beat up [along the road].”

Trainers also emphasized appropriate boardroom behaviors, explaining that such behavior encouraged cooperation on the board and presented a positive public image.

Public perception is . . . based on how you conduct business in the boardroom. This is one of the ways the public judges you. Building public support for education requires professionalism and efficiency in meetings [and the avoidance of] bedlam. If [you run meetings in a] respectful and business-like manner, people will say, “you are running my school corporation well.” If [you run meetings poorly], then inevitably [you] will not get re-elected. . . . Always operate as a team. . . . If one board member drives home an issue in a non-friendly way . . . the press will say, “The board looks bad.” You are a team. . . . When it rains, it rains on everyone. Blame hits all [board members]. . . . Boards that work with the superintendent generally get re-elected; if you don’t try to work together you will not last.

Trainers defined board meetings as business meetings, not public forums. They interpreted “business-like” to mean that all board meetings should be orderly and efficient and suggested that board members limit public discussion. One trainer warned,

This is not a New England town meeting. . . . It is a meeting of the board that the public has a right to attend. Letting the public debate each item [on the agenda] is not wise, [the meeting] becomes an open public forum.

Although no official action is taken at board workshops, they are open to the public and subject to the same best practices. Public discussion in workshops poses the

same threat to order and efficiency as public discussion in board meetings. One superintendent and board member training team offered this workshop model.

[Generally] workshops are the superintendent's. He controls them. Workshops are designed to inform the board about why the superintendent is making a recommendation and the board announces support or tells the superintendent their concerns. The superintendent then sees if he has a consensus, if [the item] is safe to bring to the board [for formal approval]. [During the workshop] it is [the superintendent's] prerogative to recognize a person [from the public sector] for comment. [We recommend that you do not allow any public comment]. It is a serious mistake to have a public hearing on each issue. If you open up a workshop to the public, it turns into a public forum. You will not get anything accomplished.

Trainers said that too much discussion among board members could also be troublesome.

Debating the motion is where you get into trouble. [For one thing,] meetings get too long. When you get beyond two hours of debate on issues, your productivity declines significantly. Or you may get too passionate in your meetings and make personal attacks on fellow board members.

Discussion, both public and board member, can be limited, and order and efficiency maintained at meetings by observing the rule of "no surprises." This means individual board members speak privately with the superintendent about problems and issues before the meeting.

It is important not to surprise the superintendent and not to surprise one another. . . . You have a responsibility to bring items up at the meeting if you think you need to but it is best to bring it to the superintendent [privately].

These private meetings, trainers suggested, become a kind of pre-meeting "homework."

Do not sit at meetings and ask all your questions. You get your packet seven days in advance so read, research, call staff and the superintendent to get answers to your questions. [Before the meeting] is the time to do it.

Another strategy trainers suggested for moving meetings along quickly is the use of a consent agenda.

The consent agenda is a good thing to use . . . a timesaving mechanism. [Consent agenda] items are routine items that the board does not want to discuss. You can vote on lots of things very quickly. You can list the entire agenda as consent and then ask each board member to pull the items they wish to discuss whether at the meeting or before. . . . If a lot of items are pulled [from the consent agenda] then the board is not doing their homework of reading the back-up material or the superintendent is not providing enough back up [information].

If the public raises controversial issues at board meetings, trainers advised that board members not respond at the meeting, but rather turn the problem over to the superintendent or board attorney.

Because you are elected by the people it is understandable that you feel responsible to get something done when a teacher or parent complains. *But your responsibility is to the superintendent* [italics added]. . . . Parents can complain, but you do not have to act on every complaint. . . . You can just listen and say, "Thank you very much". . . . You are not required to act on public comment. You can say you will take their comments under advisement and move on. . . . Sometimes we create our own problems when we act too quickly. "No" is hard for an elected official to say, [but] no decision is a decision. . . . If there are 40 people, then you better let the superintendent put the issue in proper perspective. . . . Or, when parents come and pressure you, turn to your attorney. He can say to come back in two or three weeks and a lot can happen in that time. For one, the parent will calm down. Two or three weeks cures a lot of things.

Allowing public appeals to the board presents another problem because it undermines expert authority. One trainer suggested, "Appeals undercut the principal's authority and gets into micromanagement."

Beside advising board members about proper boardroom protocol, trainers also advised board members about appropriate behaviors outside of the boardroom. They warned board members to steer clear of the "muddy" line between policy and administration. Trainers acknowledged the difficulty of actually finding the line, but still

stressed the importance of doing so because crossing that line threatens the board member's relationship with the superintendent.

It is hard to appreciate what is policy and what is administration—it is a muddy area. One of the hardest lessons to understand is the difference between policy and administration. [Nonetheless] there needs to be a very clear delineation and [you must] develop a clear understanding of the difference. The day-to-day operation of the schools is the superintendent's responsibility. . . . You can't micromanage the school system. . . . If you are not careful [you'll] overstep the line so far it is hard to get back where you are supposed to be.

One trainer suggested that board members avoid issues until the superintendent brings it to a board meeting. "Until something is brought to the board in a public meeting, it is not a board matter." He also warned that schools and classrooms are on the administrative side of the line. "The board has no authority in a classroom." Another trainer offered a potential solution for some board members. "A lot of boards give a lot of responsibility to the superintendent."

Fred's understanding of his job mirrors these best-practice suggestions. He communicates privately with the superintendent between meetings about problems and agenda items, thus limiting potential public conflict and consequently keeping meetings orderly and efficient. Fred remarked,

The superintendent is your leader of the system. . . . I deal primarily with the superintendent. . . . If I have any questions, I call the school board office. . . . If I can foresee [problems], I take care of them [privately]. . . . [Then] I've done my best to not get it out there and get in a shouting match at the school board meeting in front of everybody. . . . I don't particularly like conflict. If I'm gonna have it, I'm gonna have it behind a closed door.

Fred finds that limiting boardroom discussion saves time, avoids conflict, and inhibits the disorderly environment that makes an undesirable, unbusiness-like public impression.

[At meetings] we only talk about what's on the agenda. . . . If we have a controversial issue, we may have a town hall meeting. . . . If we advertise we want public input, we take it. . . . At the beginning of every meeting we invite the community to address the board with any unagendasized question or comment they might have. . . . [But] certain aspects of [the school system] need to run like a business. . . . We have one or two board members who say, "Put it out there—let's go with it, let's get it in the public, hash it out." They feel like it's all public. Everything's public. I don't think that's a good thing to do. I think once you put it out there like that—in the heat of the battle—things are said. And you probably don't want the public to hear a lot of that stuff. That's [not] the way I think business should be run.

Deferring to expert authority and superintendent recommendations, and using the chain of command to give problem solving over to the superintendent and staff saves him time and keeps him from getting "run ragged" by public demands. Beside, said Fred, if problems come to the board, the public expects you to solve them, otherwise, "you get blamed for [those problems]."

I'm a big believer in the chain of command. . . . [If parents realize they can] yank the [principal's] chain [they] try to bypass the principal [and] come to the board. . . . [then, if] the board goes against the principal then you cause another problem there. Those are small things that really could create big problems. . . . So I just decided I was going to screen this stuff. . . . I started using our system to give [the public] answers. . . . I was directing [people with problems] back to the principals at the school or to some other administrator that could help. . . . So it isn't so much that I've shut myself off from [the public's problems]; I just became wiser in how to handle things.

By deferring to expert authority, Fred is able to keep a good relationship with the superintendent. Fred believes this relationship is essential if he hopes to accomplish anything. "You need a good relationship with the superintendent. . . . That's the only way you can accomplish anything. . . . If you alienate [the superintendent and staff] then you can't get anything accomplished." Fred summed up, "You need to know how to get along."

In my observations of board meetings in Fred's district, I saw best-practice training in action. Fred's board has earned FSBA's designation as a Master Board. This means that at least three of the five school board members and the superintendent have completed the Master Board Training Program offered by the FSBA. The following is an example of a meeting in Fred's district.

The first item on the agenda after the call to order, prayer, and pledge, was citizen input—any member of the public wishing to speak was invited to fill out a form requesting the opportunity to be heard. No one did so.

Next, they used a consent agenda to approve 15 items as one item with no discussion. Other items beyond the consent agenda also passed without board discussion: a budget amendment; the annual financial report; plans for classroom additions; pre-payment of registration fees for a training conference; approval of out-of-field teachers; dual enrollment agreements; personnel resignations, appointments, transfers, retirements, and leave requests; athletic supplements; lease agreements; and three grant applications. Five more items, about facilities, food service equipment and accessories being removed from inventory, lease agreements, a request for a courier position, and a request for a computer network position, drew questions from board members to the superintendent and staff, but did not engender discussion among the board members themselves.

Several informational agenda items did not require official board action: a physician from the local health department came to "calm any fears" about incidences of hepatitis A in the schools; eight different district administrators provided staff reports; the superintendent presented informational items; and a union representative invited the board to a fund raiser.

A final agenda item provided board members the opportunity to address any issues not on the agenda. Two board members took this opportunity to remind others of an upcoming reading council meeting and a small district consortium dinner meeting at an upcoming FSBA conference. Concluding the business of their district, the board adjourned just one hour and twenty minutes after the call to order.

Fred takes pride in his county's Master Board status and frames his own accomplishments in a corporate-bureaucratic governance model. Board meetings in Fred's county "run like a business." Their board presents a professional appearance to their community. They meet just once a month and, as described above, keep their meetings short, orderly, and efficient. "I recognize the school district is the largest public entity in the county. . . . It is a business and I see the school board as the board of directors for that business."

Fred derives his sense of accomplishment from maintaining the district's financial stability, improving the district's facilities, and assuring the district's political peace.

I realize that there aren't a lot of things other than approving the budget and establishing policy that I can do as a board member. . . . Budget is . . . one of the very few things that we still basically have without question as a responsibility . . . our last . . . our number one priority.

He has given up his goals about curriculum issues, giving over those responsibilities to the "good people" in the district office. And he considers this a mark of his success; "One mark of success is to surround yourself with good people . . . you influence programs through having good people . . . who bring good programs to us to approve."

Further questioned about his specific role in "surrounding himself with good people" he said,

Our influence is kind of indirect. . . . Some say we're hiring . . . we're hiring but we're not selecting. . . . Our job is to approve [people] once they're selected. . . . The superintendent recommends all personnel to the school board . . . we only act on the recommendations of the superintendent. The only way we cannot accept is to give good cause and I've never known that to happen in this county.

He also considers it a major accomplishment that his county has kept the budget balanced.

We've been able to spend our money wisely. . . . We have had good sound business management in our county. We have never had to borrow money to make payroll or monthly expenses. We've been able to maintain a cash flow that's adequate to take care of our monthly needs. . . . We have maintained a business that has never been questioned by anyone in authority as to the integrity of the board and what we were doing.

Asked about his specific role in budget issue accomplishments, he elaborated,

Board members vote on the policy or the budget that is being presented [by the superintendent at the board meeting]. . . . Basically what we do is approve things . . . because I think by and large it's good. We make it lawful, so to speak, by our approval. I guess that's our basic function.

He is proud of the improvements the district has made in its facilities.

Nine years ago we had some tremendous facility needs. We were in terrible shape. An embarrassment. Every single school was lined with portables. . . . The brick and mortar within our district was falling down around us. . . . We have brought our facilities into such much better shape than nine years ago, it's just unbelievable!

However, when prompted to explain further the board's specific role in addressing the district facility needs, he said,

We had to apply. [An administrator] knew there was going to be some facilities funding [appropriated by the legislature] coming up this year so he had all of our stuff laid out for us and all we had to do was go in and look it over. . . . It was very easy . . . [because] the state put a big push on getting rid of all portables . . . the board just supported the support staff. We have to vote on all these things and approve them. That was basically our role—kind of just supporting this.

Fred attributes these accomplishments to teamwork. And the teamwork keeps the peace that is an accomplishment in itself and that allows for more accomplishments.

I think we've accomplished a significant amount of work due to the board's unity in working together. . . . [The work] has to be a team effort. We've got a board that works together. We're not feuding and fighting, you know. . . . There has to be a good relationship between the board members and the superintendent for it to work.

While he has tamped down many of his original goals, Fred considers himself part of the team responsible for the above accomplishments. Being part of the district team offers him a psychological peace about the work that sustains his efforts to keep on *trying* to improve the schools.

I've not come as far as I'd like to, of course. But we always strive to reach higher goals: We are all trying accomplish a better education system for our students. . . . We're trying to get the best teachers we can find—certified in-field teachers. We're trying to work on lowering the teen pregnancy ratio. . . . We try to look at new innovative ideas in our district that could be a help to our district. . . . We're trying to grasp hold of new funding sources, new grant possibilities to assist us with the budgeting constraints that we're under. . . . We're really working on trying to get the lottery money back.

Fred also *tries* to focus on the positive.

[I] try to speak positively about our schools. Schools do a lot of good things and there's a lot of good things you can say about schools. . . . I try to speak about the positive aspects of what we do and what we have done and what we're going to do. . . . I talk about positive things. I can't dwell on things that are negative. . . . I'm not a negative thinking person. I'm a positive thinking person. . . . [I] don't get bogged down in the negative. You do a lot of good things and people rarely give you any credit for that.

Fred's positive attitude is, in part, politically motivated.

I got a vote from a guy, he says, "Tell me something bad about the school board." I said, "I don't really have anything bad to say about it. If it was that bad I wouldn't want to be a part of it. There's always room for improvement but you just don't put anything down that you want to be a part of." He says, "You have my vote."

Fred also *tries* to be successful and effective. This means he finds satisfaction and psychological peace knowing that he has “done all that he can.”

It's like going out and playing a ball game. I played a lot of sports and I played a lot of games where I did everything I could and I still lost the game. But when I walked in and took my shower I felt good about myself. It's the same way with this job. If you do everything you can, but things don't turn out just right, but you've done everything within your power, then you have to be satisfied with that.

Fred has adjusted his ideas about school board member effectiveness.

We've just got to do the best that we can. . . . There really isn't one specific thing that a person would have to be in order to be an effective board member . . . [it] varies according to what we're doing and how we're able to exist . . . that makes the job workable and doable.

In spite of his good intentions and best efforts to improve the system, Fred has given up his original goals about the changes he hoped to make. He gives over to superintendent recommendations and gives over discussion to the private arena. He gives in when the public voice of resistance is strong. Fred views success as a balancing act. It means taking care not to give over so much that the public sees him as a “rubber stamp.” It also means taking care not to give in to the public so much that it aggravates his relationship with the superintendent. Finally, it means taking care not to give up his goals to the point that his work becomes meaningless. Maintaining this balance keeps the district's political peace and Fred's own psychological peace about board work.

Fred has been re-elected unopposed twice. To him, this means that the public has judged his work on the board favorably, and himself as worthy of the public's trust. “You know you're doing a good job when you run unopposed.” To him, this means he is a success even if the substance of his accomplishments is uncertain. He summed up the results of his board service tentatively, “It's been a good situation, I've enjoyed it, and I

think I have contributed. . . . I think I certainly have contributed. I like to think I've given back something. I think we have been able to move forward constantly."

The Democratic Governance Model

Fred provides evidence that the corporate-bureaucratic governance model is dominant in board training and promoted in board work. However, Webb and Sherman (1989), drawing on Dewey's conception of the democratic ideal, describe a different set of governance practices: free and open expression of ideas; inclusiveness that assures that no one is excluded from participating in the democratic discussion; bringing reason to bear on common problems; public discussion on matters of public policy; belief in the process of debate and tolerance of conflict; and understanding the necessity of compromise between people who have diverse personal preferences.

These democratic notions, applied to board work, challenge the best practices that the corporate-bureaucratic governance model promotes and that Fred espouses. When board members do not follow best practices and attempt instead to practice such democratic skills as those described above, they find themselves disturbing—rather than keeping—both the district's political peace and their own psychological peace.

Democratic practices: disturbing the peace. Laura is a board member ideal type who expresses the value of these democratic practices in board work. When she decided to run for the board, she was hopeful that, if elected, she could improve the system by sharing decision-making power. She believes that anyone can help change the system if they bring issues to the forefront.

It doesn't make sense not to involve people. . . . The more people you bring in, the better the decision will be. . . . You have to go to schools and . . . get the input from whomever the person or persons are at that school about what they feel like will make their school better. . . . It is irrelevant

whether [a person] is the boss or the lowest person on the pay scale. . . . Whenever someone or enough people make noise then politicians have to listen. Just like the squeaky wheel gets the grease. . . . Just about anybody . . . could bring attention to a problem and then cause something to happen.

Laura believes that inclusion in decision-making should extend beyond the school system to parents and school councils and that the board must not be "afraid to look at a problem for what it really is and solve it."

[We need to] let the parents make a few of the decisions about how their child is educated . . . to make sure that their children are getting the education they need . . . and that the board members are making decisions that are helping that to happen.

Laura thinks that sharing power is a way to provide "teachers and students with what they need to improve the learning environment." But she has observed that power and decision-making authority is not shared as much as it might be. "Power [too often] is left in the hands of one person. . . . The superintendent makes the decisions and the majority of the board does what he says."

Not long after she was elected, Laura encountered barriers that made her realize the size of the challenge she faced. She found that including others, even those in the schools, in decision making is difficult and time-consuming. For example, she wanted to share the board agenda material with principals. She thought if they had the agenda materials they would be better able to influence board decisions. But she was frustrated at how difficult it was to get this done.

It sounds like not a big deal . . . but it took an awful lot to get it out there. We had to make a motion, of course, that we do this, then order the bulletin boards and then ask for a report on how long it was going to be before they're put in place. . . . Good grief! These are principals of our schools! Who should have copies of the agenda and supporting documents more so than the principal of a school? This is their business! This is the school's business that we're dealing with at these board

meetings! Everything that we do impacts one school or the other or all of them!

She also discovered that opportunities for public inclusion were circumvented in exchange for expediency. For example, a process of including the public in reviewing books for the schools' library was undermined when "an employee in the system who happened to be handy" was asked to sign a form indicating approval without even having reviewed the book. Laura thought this sent the message that public inclusion in the book review process was, "a very insignificant detail." If it is important to include the public in book reviews, she said, "It means you take enough time to have lay people come in and actually review the book."

Unfortunately, she also found the public generally ill prepared to participate meaningfully in decision-making. They were apathetic, uninformed, and unaware of "very important things" going on in the school system. "The problem a lot of people have about school systems is they simply don't know what's going on. They don't have a clue. They are not in the boardroom, they don't come to meetings."

The fact that parents and the public "don't necessarily have all the information they need" is not surprising to her. She too struggles to get the information she needs to get on the same "wavelength" with the superintendent and staff.

Because [the superintendent and staff] deal with each other every day . . . they are on a communication wavelength all the time. . . . The board may have some information, but they're not on the same wavelength as the staff and superintendent.

Laura believes that sharing information at board meetings can provide the opportunity for the public and those within the system, but outside of the district office,

to become informed about important issues. Democratic discussion at board meetings can provide an opportunity for collective persuasion.

I think a good board member can accomplish positive change . . . [and] contribute to the good of the school district [and] . . . influence decision making . . . if they know their subject area and if they've done their research and if they're informed about it, then if another board member at the meeting at the time of the decision making—if they're not real sure—I think that sometimes the board member that knows his subject can sell it to the rest of the board.

Although she sounds tentative about the chances of this happening, she believes that public discussion is an important part of the school board role. “[The board has] a role to play that says it’s necessary to voice your opinion.” Unfortunately, she has found her fellow board members’ generally unwilling to have dialogue at board meetings.

Individuals are not willing to say what they think and how they feel regardless of the setting. In the boardroom, a board member or superintendent who is quite candid in any other setting may choose not to be candid . . . because it’s public.

The situation bothers her. “I like to communicate. I like to be open and honest and forthright. And when that’s limited by others’ desire to do the same or not, I don’t enjoy that process.”

If she insists on public discussion, she risks alienating both other board members and the superintendent. “You need a good relationship with other board members. You can’t get anything done with one, you need three. . . . If you alienate people, then you can’t get anything accomplished.” Without the support of her fellow board members, she fears becoming ineffective. “You’re just one school board member, and you may be enthusiastic about something . . . I might be very passionate in something I want to do, but . . . [without the support of the others], it’s just a one-man singing group.”

Ironically, either way she gets nothing accomplished. She gives up her opportunity to influence the board in order not to alienate them. This means the board never collectively discusses their opinions.

Laura thinks her fellow board members either talk to the superintendent privately about their views on issues, or simply go along, without question, with whatever recommendations the superintendent brings to the board meeting.

When [you observe] situations that would have required a discussion in order for a consensus to have been reached and a discussion is not held publicly . . . [either] discussions that should not have gone on privately went on, [or else] you had five people who had no opinion, [who] didn't care, [who] basically were ready to approve anything. [Maybe] whatever came as far as recommendations were somehow magically agreeable with everyone.

One trainer noted that public discussion can threaten superintendent survival. "In reality, superintendents, especially those who survive, have ways of finding out, not in public, what school board members think." She realizes that public discussion and questioning make the superintendent's job more difficult. She knows that her beliefs about the work cause tension in her relationship with the superintendent. "[The superintendent] takes it very personally . . . when we don't go along with everything he wants to happen." No public discussion also means never publicly speaking against, or publicly considering alternatives to, the superintendent's recommendation. She figures he will be relieved if she loses next year's election. "I try not to be naïve. . . . I might prefer a [board member] that gave me less resistance too." And sometimes she feels worn down.

There have been times when I wondered if . . . I really ought to go ahead and ask [my question] because it was going to be uncomfortable for people to hear it. [But I tell myself] I have to [express my concern] whether it's comfortable or not. . . . If I can't handle expressing my views publicly in some way, shape, or form then I need to look and see if this is what I need to be doing.

She does not like being “the one who has to continually pose the question.” She does not like feeling shut out or silenced. “I’m human. I don’t necessarily like being told [she simulates the sound of the gavel], ‘Bang, bang, bang. Excuse me, but we need to move on here.’” She longs for what she calls “A team thing, you know . . . [being] part of a team, working as a team.”

She believes that teamwork means the board must engage in significant discussion of issues with one another and that this could improve the system.

You need to listen to [experts], but you need to have a confidence or a faith in your own opinion. . . . No matter what the issue, no matter how difficult it is, no matter what my view is, or [other’s] view[s] [are], we can grapple with it to the betterment of the district, not to the detriment of the district. And [no one] is diminished in that process. . . . If there is disagreement among us I have made a conscious effort to not let it get personal or under my skin. It’s a job. If there’s any disagreement . . . it’s all done in the context of who we are and what we’re there to do. It’s not a personal thing. . . . Of course you’re supposed to reach consensus and it works better if you have a harmonious relationship with everybody. . . . It’s like icing on the cake if it’s there. But it’s not necessary for you to do your job.

Ironically, trying to practice her idea of teamwork makes her feel less a part of the board-superintendent team. She thinks that the fact that her view of the work creates a disturbance is a sign of a problem. “When there is a negative response to what I believe to be my role, when the superintendent has too much trouble with that, then there’s a problem.” Laura thinks that the solution to this problem lies in discussing the problem with the board and superintendent.

We have a section of the agenda for board comments where I can put it out right there and then the board can either respond or discuss. [I haven’t yet done so] because of the dynamics and relationships between individuals [and because I think I should] back off sometimes and not engage on everything. [I figure] you have to be patient. I believe in asking questions and being honest. I believe we have to address the issues. You just have to be careful. . . . I know what does *not* [italics added] work.

Ironically, solving the problem of avoiding public discussion requires public discussion of the problem. But, because public discussion of problems is avoided, the problem remains undiscussed and unresolved. She wonders, "How can we set that mode of engagement for all of the employees, how can we set something in place for the employees in our district, all of them, if we're not able to cause it to happen between six people?"

Laura turned to FSBA training for help. Unfortunately, she found that the training failed to support her view of the work. She also found that trainers did not provide clear guidance on board policy making and that the advice they did provide was confusing and contradictory. For example, FSBA trainers acknowledged the difficulty of finding the muddy line between policy and administration, yet still stressed the importance of doing so because crossing that line threatens the board member's relationship with the superintendent.

It is hard to appreciate what is policy and what is administration—it is a muddy area. One of the hardest lessons to understand is the difference between policy and administration. [Nonetheless] there needs to be a very clear delineation and [you must] develop a clear understanding of the difference.

They warned, "If you are not careful you'll overstep the line so far it is hard to get back where you are supposed to be."

In other words, even though Laura may not be able to find the line, she must be sure to avoid it. One trainer offered a way to avoid this potential conflict, staying on the safe side of the line. "A lot of boards give a lot of responsibility to the superintendent."

Some researchers call into question the simplistic solutions offered in training. Tallerico (1989b) states, "The simplistic claim that the board makes policy and the

administration implements it is a myth. . . . [Such a] tidy separation of duties" has probably never existed (p. 25). Price (2001) notes,

The reason most often cited for poor relationships [between the board and the superintendent] is the problem of role confusion. . . . Conventional wisdom suggests that such conflict largely can be resolved if boards simply stick to matters of district policy and superintendents stick to administration and operations. Those who advocate this role distinction for school boards and superintendents follow a governance model commonly found in the corporate world. [But] corporate models of governance simply don't fit the reality of school district governance in a large number of school districts for two fundamental reasons. . . . First . . . school board members are politically elected office holders who define their role differently than the typical corporate board members (p. 46) . . . [and second] . . . the role of the superintendent has been undergoing a profound transformation . . . from manager/CEO to leader. (p. 48)

Professional trainers who work with boards and superintendents to clarify their roles, also document confusion in the board-superintendent responsibilities for policy making. Dawson and Quinn (2000) observe,

Sometimes it seems as if the school board and the superintendent have reversed roles. Many superintendents spend more time with policy than their boards do, and many boards deal with operational matters at least as much as the superintendent does. (p. 13)

FSBA trainers failed to provide the opportunity for board members to discuss and resolve such confusion. In response to board members' questions attempting to clarify their policy-making responsibilities, trainers failed to agree on even a definition of policy. They offered conflicting advice. One trainer gave a general definition, "Policy is the structure for how the entire district is going to operate. It is how you decide how business is going to be done in your district." Another said, "Policy is what the board does—its procedures—like the Pupil Progression Plan. How you handle field trips should be policy. Daily operating procedures." Yet a third claimed, "If it is brought to the board in a public meeting and the board made a decision, it is policy."

Trainers also expressed contradictory views regarding the level of specificity that is desirable in policy statements. One trainer recommended avoiding specificity in policy. Too much specificity means inflexibility that restricts principals' actions. "There should be a lack of specificity in school board policy. It should be an outline." Another trainer suggested the opposite, "Twenty years ago I used to tell boards not to adopt specific policy and not to adopt too many. I have changed my mind. You have to be specific now."

One trainer seemed to suggest not worrying about anything unless it is brought to the board in a meeting, thus promoting a reactive role for boards. "Until something is brought to the board in a public meeting, it is not a board matter."

Trainers advised leaving schools and classrooms on the administrative side of the line. "The board has no authority in a classroom." Although Laura could understand the need for schools to have autonomy, she had found that, in reality, the line blurred between school policies and district policies. For example, the board's Student Code of Conduct, which state law mandates the board adopt, is a *district* policy that governs student behavior in each *school*.

[When you have] a kid making straight As and some [other] kid comes down the hall, knocks him down, jumps on him, goes to really abusing them, then that kid's got to defend himself. But, according to board policy, when they passed that first lick they got five days . . . suspension [and] they can't make up any of their work. Whether it was their fault or not. Five zeroes in a semester would be hard to overcome. This kind of [problem] comes to the board because those parents are saying, 'Hey, you affected my kids GPA. He's never been in trouble, he's a good student, he's gonna be the kid that goes on to the university and gets a degree and goes on and has a career. But you're affecting him with this policy.'

Trainers say boards should not deal with such problems in board meetings, but in reality she had found that policy is often an appropriate response to problems, as well as a cause of problems. She also found that sometimes policy issues surfaced as problems even when no policies existed. This caused another problem.

We had a kid that had a big Confederate flag on the antenna of his truck and pulled up in the school campus. Some of the black kids went to the assistant black principal and said, "We want that moved, we want that off. We think that's a racial remark, a racial symbol." So the flag was removed. . . . The Sons of the Confederacy got involved and started coming to our meetings. . . . Our board attorney told them, "The board has never put a policy in banning this flag."

And, in the above example, she said it discouraged her that the problem was not resolved. "It just went on and on and on and never did get resolved. . . . [It] just took up a whale of a lot of time. Finally, I guess they burnt themselves out on it.

One trainer, a school board attorney, conducted a session on Florida's Administrative Procedures Act (APA), the state law that regulates school board policy-making processes. He spent the entire time warning board members of serious problems surrounding the law and its intent.

APA governs how we live. . . . It governs procedurally how you operate. . . . It is a draconian punitive measure that affects the way we do business. . . . It effectively makes it harder for an agency to pass rules and easier to sue an agency about the rule. . . . For the first time in history, the Florida Legislature has said it is OK to award attorney fees for successful challenges to school board rules. . . . You thought personal injury lawyers were bad? Now school boards are available to the same kind of folks to challenge school board rules. . . . School boards have the burden of justifying their rules. Some rules get constituents upset—contract awards, bids, student discipline, employee hiring and firing, school boundary changes. APA allows rules to be challenged and tells how hearings must be conducted. . . . Rules can be declared null and void.

APA also gives a smart person a mechanical way to force you to deal with a subject. . . . Some person in the audience may say, "I want you to adopt a

rule on birth control—condoms—and here's my petition to have that rule adopted."

Although we have lobbied the legislature to try to get relief, the legislature says, "no—we want you under [APA] even though it costs you money and makes you vulnerable. . . ." Schools are multi-million dollar businesses. If a bid protest is filed, it stops all procedures in their tracks. Defenses have a legal cost and cost staff time.

[The law is] against school boards. . . . [It was] passed based on the assumption that state agencies do bad things to good people, that we have shadow government, and pass too many rules. . . . The structure is a political cage. . . . Mention it and teeth will grind. . . . It is a lawyer's nightmare.

He emphasized the importance of giving over to the school board attorney on matters relating to the APA.

[The Administrative Procedures Act] is serious stuff, as complicated as the tax code. . . . Get good advisers. . . . If you have questions about the APA you should hold your attorney's hand. Even if you disagree with the attorney take his advice. Even if you don't like it.

Trainers also noted the added difficulty of getting elected superintendents to implement board policy. This is important because the majority of Florida board members serve in districts with elected superintendents. The only problem or potential solution discussed was to figure out a way to get along.

An elected superintendent . . . does not have to implement [what the board demands]. You can keep beating him up at board meetings, but until next election not much can be done. If you are in a district that elects its superintendent, then a big piece [of your job] is to figure out politically how to get along with that person.

Boards not only experience pressure locally to defer their policy-making duties to the local education administration, they also find, as much research (Hazard, 1978; Kirst, 1994a; Miron & Wimpelberg, 1992) quoted earlier in this study suggests, that increased state and federal pressures and mandates further diminish their policy-making domain.

Nonetheless, FSBA trainers did not present these issues for discussion and potential solution. Without clear support or guidance, or even the opportunity to discuss her concerns, Laura realizes the difficulty of achieving her goals.

I realized [the work] was going to be a lot harder than I thought. It was going to take a lot more work than I had even anticipated . . . and it was going to take every bit of energy and effort and experience and understanding and communication skill that I ever had or thought I could have in order to be successful in what I was trying to do. I thought, 'Is this really what I want to do? Whew! That's a lot to expect!'

She knows how much easier the work could be if she followed best practices—if she kept the peace.

It's much easier not to ask questions . . . to just agree and go through the motions. . . . If you're not careful you do find yourself—me included—sitting there going [she makes head-bobbing movements]. [Sometimes it's not worth the trouble.] If things aren't going to be better for the child down the road . . . [some things] would probably be best left alone.

She often feels like she is not accomplishing anything.

[Sometimes I think I am] just using so much oxygen and so much verbiage and so much time . . . [and sometimes I wonder] do we really need school boards? . . . [If] what we do is approve things that people bring to us, [if] that's our basic function, that doesn't seem like that much of an important role.

She struggles to keep on, to not give in, to not give over, to not give up.

You don't change the system overnight. You have to be persistent. . . . [You have to] be true to the reason you . . . wanted to become a board member. To every now and then remind yourself why was it you came in here to see if you're still there. . . . [It's important] to know what your principles are and your standards are and not be wishy-washy or flim flam but constant. . . . [To be] someone who likes to work with people but at the same time doesn't mind being alone—whether planning, or thinking, or reading, or out there when you're posing a concern or a question—because you are going to be alone, sometimes for long periods of time.

As she anticipates another election year coming up, she says, “I [know that I] need to be able to say how I think things have specifically improved because I’ve been on the board. [But] there’s nothing really absolute.”

If she keeps the democratic faith, she disturbs the district peace and her own psychological peace. If she keeps the peace, she gives up her hopes. She explains how she keeps on, “You have to hope and pray that in the future things will be better.”

Summary: To Keep the Peace or to Keep the Faith?

Fred and Laura both strive to make a contribution to the schools in their communities, yet both found that even their seemingly modest goals for general improvements were hard to make happen. Both began to think differently about board work than they did before elected. Both struggle with the work, and both have learned to keep on trying.

However, their differences provide the most instruction. Fred and Laura have different ideas about what types of improvements should be made in the system. They have different beliefs about board work and different ideas about what constitutes an accomplishment. These differences highlight the inherent tensions between the best practices promoted by the corporate-bureaucratic governance model and the democratic practices demanded by a democratic governance model.

Fred has learned to adjust to the demands of the work and internalized the bureaucratic skills that comprise the best practices of the corporate-bureaucratic governance model. In changing his thinking about the work, he has made adjustments in his behaviors. Fred’s allegiance to best practices means the “system runs smoothly” and he does not “get beat up.” As part of the district team, he finds satisfaction in district

accomplishments related to budget and facilities. He accepts board work as a business-laden agenda and gives over his rank authority to the professional authority of the superintendent. Staying within the corporate-bureaucratic governance model brings him a personal, psychological peace and brings the district a political peace.

Unlike Fred, Laura finds best practices of the corporate-bureaucratic governance model sometimes confusing and often at odds with her view of the work. She struggles to infuse the democratic skills of a democratic governance model, especially inclusion and public discussion, into board work. The “mode of engagement” that she would like to model for district decision-making creates tension in her relationships with the superintendent and her fellow board members.

Unlike Fred, she thinks private dialogue eliminates important, meaningful public discussion between board members and keeps the public uninformed of important educational issues. She believes that board work requires public discussions even if it hinders short, smoothly run, efficient business meetings; even if disagreement, debate, and conflict enter the boardroom; even if it violates the best practices that the corporate-bureaucratic governance model promotes; and even if it disrupts the peace that best practices promote and Fred tries to keep.

Unlike Fred, Laura found no support for her view of the role in training and has reservations about following the best practices. Practicing democratic principles and failing to follow the best practices disturbs both her psychological peace (her sustenance and her satisfaction with the work) and the district’s political peace (her relationships with the superintendent, staff, and fellow board members).

Unlike Fred, Laura faces a dilemma. If she keeps the peace, she must give up what she sees as the essence of board work; she must give up her conception of democratic governance. If she keeps the faith in democratic tenets, she must violate the best practices advice offered by experts, giving up her psychological peace and the district's political peace. In her view, it is impossible to keep the peace and also keep the faith.

In Chapter 5, I will explain further how and why the nature of board work becomes keeping the peace. I will propose and describe a school board member's role based on democratic theory rather than on the best-practices orthodoxy.

CHAPTER 5 THE THREAT OF PEACE

Overview

In Chapter 3, I described a grounded theory of board work that I called “keeping the peace.” In Chapter 4, I elaborated on the tension between the corporate-bureaucratic governance model and the democratic governance model of board work.

In this chapter, I suggest that my grounded theory of board work signals deep governance problems. I review research that indirectly supports my keeping-the-peace theory and explain how typical board work conflicts with democratic principles. I propose democratic theory as a proper and more effective foundation for board work and I describe how daily board work might look if it were guided by democratic principles. I suggest that failure to address the problem of the lack of fit between the corporate-bureaucratic governance model and the democratic purpose of board work can have dire consequences for democracy. Keeping the peace is not democratic governance.

Best-Practices Orthodoxy: Unfulfilled Promise

In Chapter 2, I noted that much of what passes for school board research, what I have called the best-practices orthodoxy, is little more than booster literature. That material presents a set of generally accepted views about traditional school board work and promises board members who follow these practices effective nonpolitical control of the school system.

The best-practices orthodoxy has its roots in the Progressive Reform Movement of the early 1900s. The movement created a bureaucratic educational structure separating

governance into two layers, part-time citizens and full-time professional administrators (Lortie, 1975; Tyack, 1974). The resulting governance structure, created to oversee the operations of newly centralized educational organizations, emphasized expertise, professionalization, citizen control, and efficiency (Counts, 1927; Tyack, 1974; Wirt & Kirst, 1972).

The best-practices literature grows from a corporate-bureaucratic governance model and provides a bureaucratic script for board member behaviors. Although largely uninformed by scholarly research, the best-practices literature assumes the legitimacy of the orthodoxy it promotes and describes. It has taken deep root as a valid, influential theory of school board governance.

The best-practices orthodoxy promises board members that their good intentions and best efforts will ultimately result in positive accomplishments and effective governance. Unfortunately, the best-practices orthodoxy falls short of this promise. The corporate-bureaucratic governance model, in spite of its emphasis on expertise, professionalism, and efficiency, has failed to deliver on its promise of effective citizen control of the schools.

Bureaucracy and Board Peacekeeping

Zeigler and Jennings (1974) have documented the powerful influence the bureaucratic structure exerts on board member behaviors. The "growing professionalism" and "aura of expertise" (p. 121) that characterizes the bureaucratic structure, they say, means that board work becomes little more than a representation of the administration's program. Sergiovanni (1991, p. 526) describes the pressure board members are under to surrender authority to the professional administrators who run the school system. "Local school boards are criticized and are admonished to follow the advice of local

superintendents—the professionals who know more about what is good for education than they do.” In my grounded theory of board work, I called this surrender of power “giving over.”

As Wilson (1989) explains school bureaucracies, this behavior makes sense. He analyzed different bureaucracies, creating a typology based on the observable work of those within the organization and what changes because of their work. Work in schools, he said, is not observable and the results of the work are difficult to assess. Additionally, school organizations are subject to a high degree of conflict. He characterized schools as “coping organizations” (p. 78), the most complex and difficult type of bureaucracy to manage.

Sizer (1992) provides an interesting parallel to my keeping-the-peace theory of board work. He concludes that the bureaucratic structure of schools has pushed high school teachers and students to enter into a tacit agreement “to exhibit a facade of orderly purposefulness” that lowers expectations and encourages student passivity. He calls such agreements, “a Conspiracy for the Least, the least hassle for anyone. . . . As long as [the students] don’t disrupt the classroom, the substance of what takes place there is overlooked. He describes high school classrooms as places of “friendly, orderly, uncontentious, wasteful triviality” (p. 156).

My grounded theory posits this same dynamic alive in board work. The boardroom can be compared to a classroom, and the teacher (expert)-student relationship compared to the superintendent (expert)-board relationship. The corporate-bureaucratic governance model promotes a lack of substance of what happens in the boardroom, resulting in a facade of orderly purposefulness that keeps the boardroom peace. Board members lower their expectations, giving up their original goals, and become passive,

giving over their responsibilities to the superintendent. Keeping the peace is a similar "conspiracy" that supports the status quo, reduces surface conflicts, and avoids hassles for superintendents and board members.

Fred's bureaucratic "master board" model for district leadership exemplifies this no-hassles dynamic. The perfect meeting in his model is tranquil, predictable, orderly, and dispassionate. Board members move through the agenda, avoiding conflict, substantive decisions (unless endorsed by the superintendent), and surprises. Board members present a united front (every vote unanimously approves the superintendent's recommended action) and present a peaceful pretense of public deliberation and control.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the progressive movement reformed the nations school systems that most agreed had become too closely influenced by community power structures, graft, patronage, cronyism, and in urban areas, by political machines. The professionalized system it created was designed to protect decision making from these corrupting influences, and for the most part it succeeded. The new system, however, introduced several new problems identified in a new reform literature and detailed in this study: ambiguity about the role, constraints on board powers, a lack of capacity, insufficient skill and will, and a mounting loss of faith in the existing structure of school board governance.

Reformers did not intend to separate school governance from the public or to undermine civic engagement. Indeed, reformers of the day and advocates of the current system contend that the school boards are the very essence of local control democracy.

As Americans, most of us believe in the democratic concept of lay control of political functions, from the statehouse to Capitol Hill. The process begins with our local schools. We trust that reasoned people who are not "education experts" are qualified to set policy and govern the schools, to represent the "public" in public education. After all, education, in large

part, reflects community values. Who better to set the policy and direction for this values-laden enterprise than local community members? That is why we elect (or, in some few cases, appoint) public-minded citizens to the local school board, where they are charged with articulating the needs of the community to the schools and the needs of the schools to the community. (National School Boards Association, 2003)

Such claims however are not matched in practice. Sokoloff (1997) contends that school boards were originally

designed as a way for the entire local community—the public—to have control over its public schools. The board structure is an explicit acknowledgment that public schools are, or ought to be, an expression of a community's hopes and dreams for its present and future. [Yet, it is] more than a little ironic that the public schools—whose local school boards are designed to give them a close link with the public—are in fact steadily losing the support of that public. (p. 25)

As school boards fail to encourage civic deliberation, they fail to live up to their civic promise. In order to make effective governance by citizen representatives real, Sokoloff calls for reforms that bring schooling closer to the polity.

Keeping the Faith—The Democratic Promise

Democratic Questions

Kirst (1994a, p. 38) notes the erosion of confidence in and influence of school boards, claiming it is likely to continue unless we rethink and revamp the school board role. Rethinking the role means grappling with some important questions.

Sarason (1997) suggests that the first step in the task of reforming governance “is . . . to come up with . . . a clear statement of a rationale justifying governance.” He claims that

any system of governance has a purpose which that system is expressly obligated to achieve. There may be more than one purpose, but there is always one overarching purpose, i.e., a purpose judged so important that when it is not achieved, all other purposes stand little chance of being achieved. (p. x)

He asks, "Is there . . . an overarching purpose informing and powering the governance of education?" (p. x).

Gutmann (1987, p.3), a political philosopher, claims, "One of the primary moral problems of politics [is to answer the question], Who should share the authority to influence the way democratic citizens are educated?"

Democratic Politics

Gutmann (1987) believes that attempts to separate politics and schools are dangerous. In a democracy, she says, politics and education are necessarily interrelated.

We must not look upon education as a realm ideally to be separated from the tumult of democratic politics. (p.291)

Politics itself is a form of education. A more robust democratic politics . . . would render the concerns of democratic education . . . more important. Just as we need a more democratic politics to further democratic education, so we need a more democratic education to further democratic politics. If we value either, we must pursue both. (p. 18)

When citizens rule in a democracy, they determine, among other things, how future citizens will be educated. Democratic education is therefore a political as well as an educational ideal. . . . Education not only sets the stage for democratic politics, it plays a central role in it. (p. 3)

Without an active democratic politics among its citizens, a nation may give all its children free public schools, but it cannot foster the spirit of democratic education. (p. 284)

Democratic Theory

Dewey (1939a, 1939b) viewed democracy as more than a process in which citizens elect representatives who pass laws and make local policy. Democracy, he believed, was an ideal, a primary ethical value that engages individuals with society. Webb and Sherman (1989), drawing on a number of Dewey's works (1916, 1922, 1954/1927, 1931, 1933, 1963/1938, 1939a, and 1939b), explain his views on democracy. Democracy enhances what Dewey conceptualized as "human intelligence," a "habit of

mind," that can be used to identify, define, solve problems, examine habits and customs, learn from experience, and plan for the future (Webb & Sherman, 1989, p. 24). These habits include critical inquiry and the willingness to gather and examine all available evidence and openly share ideas before drawing conclusions.

Gutmann (1987), like Dewey, believes that democratic theory offers a way to solve our educational problems.

The primary aim of a democratic theory of education is not to offer solutions to all the problems plaguing our educational institutions, but to consider ways of resolving those problems that are compatible with a commitment to democratic values.

Dewey (1939a) believed that institutions, as well as individuals, could develop the habits of mind that make up his concept of intelligence. Unfortunately, says Sarason (1997), "The [current] governance system is simply and blatantly not geared to learn [or] to spread that learning" (p. xii).

Gutmann (1987) explains this institutional reluctance to learning. To permit problems to surface and to publicly deliberate their policy implications creates controversy and makes achieving public consensus difficult. Yet, she says, we should not seek to avoid political disagreement. "Political controversies over our educational problems are a particularly important source of social progress. . . . We cannot make good educational policy by avoiding political controversy" (pp. 5-6). She continues,

Reasonable people disagree . . . over what constitutes the best education, in principle as well as in practice (p. 8). . . . [However,] a democratic theory faces up to the fact of difference in our moral ideals of education by looking toward democratic deliberations not only as a means to reconciling those differences, but also as an important part of democratic education. The most distinctive feature of a democratic theory of education is that it makes a democratic virtue out of our inevitable disagreement over educational problems. (p.11)

The democratic virtue, too simply stated, is that we can publicly debate educational problems in a way much more likely to increase our

understanding of education and each other than if we were to leave the management of schools, as Kant suggests, "to depend entirely upon the judgment of the most enlightened experts." (p. 11)

Ryfe (2002) describes the deliberative democratic ideal as "a community of individuals reaching, if not political consensus, then at least political compromise, through dialogue" (p. 371). Such democratic deliberations play an important role in policy making. Gutmann (1987) elaborates:

Policies can make a discernable difference in how schools are run—provided local school politics remains competitive and conducive to public deliberation, so that school board members do not defer as a matter of course to the administrators of schools. (p. 73)

The policies that result from our democratic deliberations will . . . be more enlightened—by the values and concerns of the many communities that constitute a democracy—than those that would be made by unaccountable educational experts. (p. 11)

She further explains the benefits of public deliberation: it takes citizen involvement beyond the act of voting and citizens will more likely support policies if they have effective control over them; it provides opportunities to find better solutions to problems than we might otherwise find; and practicing these democratic skills provides the opportunity to improve the quality of our public deliberations.

Mathews and McAfee (2003) describe

the basic ideas behind the practice of deliberative democracy [offering] a brief primer on the essential work of citizenship in a democracy. Public deliberation . . . is an essential part of democratic politics. The case for public deliberation can be put simply: For democratic politics to operate as it should, the public has to act. It is not enough to vote, not enough to understand or support our elected officials, not enough to merely have opinions or keep up with current affairs. Before people can act as a public, however, they first have to decide how. Briefly put, deliberations aren't just discussions to promote better understanding. They are the way we make the decisions that allow us to act together. People are challenged to face the unpleasant consequences of various options and to "work through" the often-volatile emotions that are a part of making public decisions. (p.1)

Democratic theory and the principles that flow from it form the basis for a democratic way of governing. Apple and Beane (1995) define what Dewey called the “democratic faith [as] the fundamental belief that democracy has a powerful meaning, that it can work, and that it is necessary if we are to maintain freedom and human dignity in our social affairs” (p. 6). Following this faith demands

- 1) The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible;
- 2) Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems;
- 3) The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies;
- 4) Concern for the welfare of others and the common good;
- 5) Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities;
- 6) An understanding that democracy is not so much an ideal to be pursued as an idealized set of values that we must live and that must guide our life as a people; and
- 7) The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life. (pp. 6-7)

Democratic School Board Governance: Bringing Practice Back to Theoretical Basics

Board member commitment to the democratic principles that flow from a democratic theory can make good on the power and promise of deliberative democracy. A democratic script for school board governance could bring schooling closer to the polity and lead the system into meaningful reform.

If board work were guided by the values and practices of deliberative democracy, board members would make deliberative democracy both the means and ends of board work, defining both the purpose of their work and school board effectiveness. In doing so, they could build democratic communities by engaging the public and transforming the places where the work of education takes place. Boards can examine the democratic questions of purpose, power, and authority outlined earlier in this chapter, considering

how the corporate-bureaucratic governance model compromises the principles underlying a democratic theory of governance.

Building Democratic Communities

Dewey (1939a) claimed, "all those who are affected by social institutions [must] have a share in producing and managing them" (p. 401). Gutmann (1987) echoes this contention. "Democratic education is best viewed as a shared trust of parents, citizens, teachers, and public officials" (p.288).

Boards can design their work around transforming workplaces within their school system and building democratic relationships between the schools and the larger community. "Democracy is the best way by which we can discover what a community values for itself and its children" (Gutmann, 1987, pp. 95-96).

Engaging the public. Sokoloff (1997) states,

We elect people to represent us [on school boards and in legislatures], not so they can decide what they think is in the public's interest. Rather, we elect people so they can take the public's expression of its interest and translate it into public policy initiatives. (p. 25)

He continues, "[Boards should see to it that decisions] reflect not only the school system's informed opinion but also the public's significant and legitimate interests" (p. 27). Boards can make schools a center for public deliberation, engaging the public sufficiently in policy debates, listening closely to their concerns, encouraging the expression of diverse opinions, and helping them to reach important consensus.

Diversity makes for richer deliberations, allowing more points of view to be heard. . . . Deliberation requires a thoughtful consideration of [these] different views on an issue. It involves weighing the pros and cons of each view, working through different perspectives, and seeing where people agree and disagree. Those areas of agreement—what some call common ground—become the basis for common action. (Sokoloff, 1997, p. 26)

Pureifoy (2001) believes that meaningful public participation requires public knowledge and understanding of important issues. Public institutions, she says, "are governed by consent of the people. . . . People cannot consent to an institution they don't know and don't understand. . . . [Yet] without that consent, no institution can govern justly or effectively."

The board can make sure that the public has ample opportunity to gain the knowledge and understanding they need to participate meaningfully. Yet board work can do more than simply engaging the public. Gutmann (1987) calls for a "healthy tension between professional and communal judgment" (p. 88). Apple and Beane (1995) agree. "Exercising democracy involves tensions and contradictions . . . but [also provides] the possibility for professional educators and citizens to work together in creating more democratic schools that serve the common good of the whole community" (p. 8).

Transforming workplaces. Board members can transform schools and district offices into democratic workplaces for professionals and students. "Professional educators as well as parents, community activists, and other citizens have a right to fully informed and critical participation in creating school policies and programs for themselves and young people" (Apple & Beane, 1995, pp. 7-8).

Boards can promote policies that are participatory and empowering and that provide the opportunity for professionals as well as students to develop democratic skills. They can support making schools places where the ideals of democracy are taught, modeled, and developed through practice.

A democratic workplace develops and respects professionalism among teachers. The democratic ideal demands that "school boards and principals treat teachers as partners in determining school policy [and that there are] more participatory structures

within which teachers can join administrators and members of school boards in shaping these policies" (Gutmann, 1987, pp. 83-4).

Boards can assure that teachers share a substantial degree of control over what happens in classrooms, and that they develop the capacity for critical deliberation in their classrooms. Gutmann (1987) suggests, "if . . . teachers cannot exercise intellectual independence in their classrooms, they cannot teach students to be intellectually independent" (p. 82). Yet she also warns that teacher professionalism must be balanced against student's intellectual independence.

[If] teachers invoke their professional competence to deny students any influence in shaping the form or content of their own education [then] professional autonomy teaches deference to authority, [and therefore] teaches a lesson in conflict with the conditions of democratic deliberation. (p. 88)

In democratic schools, "children learn not just to *behave* in accordance with authority but to *think* critically about authority if they are to live up to the democratic ideal of sharing political sovereignty as citizens. (p. 51)

Meier and Schwarz (1995) underscore Gutmann's contention:

If the primary public responsibility and justification for tax-supported schooling is raising a generation of fellow citizens, then the school—of necessity—must be a place where students learn the habits of mind, work, and heart that lie at the core of such a democracy. Since you can't learn to be good at something you've never experienced—even vicariously—then it stands to reason that schools are a good place to experience what such democratic habits might be. (p. 28)

This means that board members would also need to support the aims of democratic education. Greene (1985, p. 4) states, "Surely it is an obligation of education in a democracy to empower the young to become members of the public, to participate, and play articulate roles in the public space."

If board work were guided by the values and practices of deliberative democracy, board members would build democratic communities, engaging the public and

transforming workplaces. They would make deliberative democracy both the means and ends of board work, defining both the purpose of their work and school board effectiveness.

Democratic Promise and Threat

As my theory of board work demonstrates, powerful forces within the school system work to mute the promise and power of democratic deliberation.

Democracy . . . is not doing well today. . . . Americans are cynical and angry at a political system they say neither heeds them nor serves them . . . these feelings are often referred to as a lack of agency – the feeling that people no longer control their lives or futures . . . [they] see their fates being determined by megaliths: the economic system, the criminal justice system, the health care system, the education system, the political system. . . . we find increasing evidence that people are estranged from the institutions that have been created to serve them. (Kettering Foundation, 2003, n.p.)

Aligning the nature of board work with democratic theory will be immensely difficult to achieve, but it is essential. In the United States, the importance of the link between democracy and education cannot be understated. As one report notes, “At the same time that we profess our belief that the schools are the bulwarks of democracy, we must concede that in their shortcomings they sow the seeds that could undo democracy” (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996, p. 107).

If we accept the best-practices orthodoxy and the corporate-bureaucratic governance model for school board work, we must revise either our democratic convictions or our understanding of the principles that flow from democratic theory. Alternately, if we commit to a model of board work based on democratic theory and principles, we must reject the corporate-bureaucratic governance model and the best practices that flow from it.

Following the tenets promoted by the best-practices orthodoxy result in neither district school-system control nor in effective governance, but rather in peace at the price of democratic ideals. Rather than accepting that democratic control of our bureaucratic institutions is no longer possible or desirable, boards can redefine their work to make deliberative democracy the purpose of board work. They can also redefine board effectiveness to make the values and practices of deliberative democracy the means to that end. In spite of the difficult nature of such a challenge, experiments in deliberative democracy suggest that school boards, drawing upon the findings of such experiments, could deliver on the power and promise of the democratic ideal in school board work.

Making Good on the Promise

Many organizations, committed to the ideals of deliberative democracy, share a common desire to publicly deliberate critical issues. According to the National Issues Forums Institute (2001), “[there are] thousands of [such] civic and educational institutions in the U.S.” (p.1). These organizations promote the power of public deliberation to stimulate and make possible public action, inform public officials about political possibilities, improve relations between citizens and public officials, and help citizens meet their civic responsibilities.

The National Issues Forum Institute sponsors Public Policy Institutes to teach prospective forum moderators “a basic grounding in the ideas, principles, and practical experience needed to lead their fellow citizens in deliberating on issues of public policy” (National Issues Forum Institute, 2001, p.17). Their website states,

If American democracy is to fulfill its promise, citizens must take responsibility and act together. . . . Issues Forums offer the space to deliberate about public issues . . . [to] talk about concerns, weigh drawbacks and tradeoffs, and find a shared sense of direction before making decisions. Reports on the outcomes of the forums are shared with

local, state, and national officeholders to give them insight into what the public is thinking. (National Issues Forum Institute, 2003, n.p.)

Deliberative forums attempt to develop the capacity for public judgment in a group of people. Deliberation “can reveal the general direction in which people want to move, the range of approaches to a problem that would be acceptable, and what people are or are not willing to do to solve a problem” (National Issues Forum Institute, 2001, p. 9). Yankelovich (1985) describes what it takes for people to move from opinion to judgment. Developing mature judgment, he says, requires that people explore a variety of choices, overcoming their natural resistance to facing costly tradeoffs. As they look honestly at all the pros and cons surrounding an issue, they must finally take an intellectual and emotional stand.

Another organization, the Topsfield Foundation, has created the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC). The center claims to be “a dynamic part of . . . a new movement for strengthening democracy and community building,” promoting deliberative democracy by providing communities guidance in organizing productive dialogue (SCRC, 2003).

The outcomes of public deliberation have largely been reported in the anecdotal stories people tell about their communities and in pre- and post-forum attitudinal surveys that have mainly focused on the effects of deliberation on individual participants rather than on the community at large (Ryfe, 2002). The National Issues Forum Institute (2001) summarizes these results:

Over the past ten years, there have been more than a dozen studies, conducted with a variety of research methods, including an increasing amount of attention in the past two years to the effects of citizen deliberations.

In a nutshell, the studies indicate that public deliberation makes a difference. Not only does it change the way individuals understand an

issue, it changes the way people talk with each other, and it improves a community's (society's) ability to deal with its issues, concerns, and problems. (p. 19)

Farkas, Friedman, and Bers (1995) quantified the post-forum attitudinal changes of forum participants: 78% of participants reported that the differing viewpoints they encountered were good; 71% reported that it caused them to reconsider their opinions, and 53% reported that as a result of public deliberation they actually changed their minds.

Ryfe (2002) concludes,

Participants come out of the experience feeling more informed and more connected to public life and to their communities. . . . It is in the excitement over community involvement, the instigation to public action, to reaching out beyond one's private life to share in issues of common concern, and the feeling of being personally empowered that discourse organizations make their most important impact. (p. 370)

Mathews and McAfee (2003) concur.

Some say the biggest benefit is that forums help people get a handle on complex public policy issues or understand different points of view before they act. Others say participation makes them feel less isolated, more a part of a community, more disposed to join together in civic action. Still others say that years of forums have changed the way their communities approach decision making and problem solving. Repeated deliberation, they report, changes people, and that gives them the confidence that they can eventually change their communities. (p. 4)

Doble (1997) summarizes the point as follows: "People learn that they are capable of understanding complex issues, saying reasonable things about them, [and] reaching reasonable judgments about what to do" (pp. 59-60).

According to the National Issues Forum Institute (2001):

Every kind of person seeks out and takes part in citizen deliberations; Virtually everyone is capable of deliberating important public issues; People reconsider their own opinions and judgments; People reconsider the views of others and develop a greater understanding of those viewpoints; People approach issues more realistically and are willing to consider costs, consequences, and trade-offs; People come away with a greater sense of efficacy, self-worth, and confidence (including increasing

their image of themselves as political actors who are capable of participation and action); People become more interested in political and social issues; People define their self-interests more broadly; People increase their activity around issues, and; Deliberation in a community establishes and enhances communication between groups. (p. 19)

Some public deliberation efforts relate specifically to education. The Arkansas Study Circles Project is part of the Arkansas School Boards Association Educational Foundation. Study circles across the state have engaged citizens in meaningful conversations about improving education in their state. In addition, more than 60 National Issues Forums in 34 states and the District of Columbia deliberated on the topic Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade? (Doble, 2000).

Pan and Mutchler (2000) evaluated one study circle initiative, Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools. The descriptive study of the impact of study circles and evaluation of program implementation process involved interviews, observations, and surveys. The goal of the investigation was to study the implementation process of this statewide program of study circles and to explore how state policymaker participation in study circles effects the education policy-making process. The findings indicate that:

State policymaker participation in dialogue with the public has important observable individual-level impacts. . . . Not only were policy-makers in general positively affected by their participation in study circles, the positive effects addressed the needs and desires of policymakers regarding the public on multiple levels. On the practical level, policymakers gained new information to help them assess needs. On the strategic level, they earned credibility from constituents and established relationships that may be tapped for future policy support. Finally, on a philosophical level, they participated in the support of democratic principles by acknowledging and valuing citizen participation Based on the findings of this exploratory research, researchers encourage further application and study of deliberative dialogue for enhancing and improving the state education policy making process. (p. 51)

McDonnell and Weatherford (2000) evaluated a deliberative experiment "built on political theorists' ideas and hypotheses about the ideal of deliberative democracy" (p.

11). Using a comparative case study method, they examined the “feasibility of practical deliberation” in local school districts in South Carolina. They describe the project as “a diverse group of citizens coming together for the purpose of discussing the kind of community and schools they want, to formulate a plan for furthering those goals, and [to] then take action.” They summarize,

Deliberative forums can be more inclusive than conventional venues for citizen participation in education politics . . . [and] diverse participants can discuss controversial issues in an open and civil fashion. . . . The experiment represents a promising strategy for engaging a broad segment of the community in the work of educating children. (p. 1)

This research suggests that deliberative democracy holds promise for improving relations between school board members and citizens, developing a sense of civic responsibility in citizens, helping the public to become more informed on educational issues, and helping to build stronger communities. However, as Ryfe (2002) reviewed deliberative initiatives around the country, he noted that, while efforts to create public policy by creating public voice have mushroomed across the country, most of these efforts have not been rigorously evaluated. More work is needed to fully evaluate these efforts.

Implications for Future Research

My theory adds to the growing body of research that questions the efficacy of school board governance and the purpose and nature of board work. This study is a call for both action and further research to more fully examine the educational governance problem identified here and the opportunities for making board work more democratic.

Very few deliberative democrats have sought to apply their principles to the real world. . . . Theorists of deliberative democracy might learn a great deal from practitioners of public deliberation (p. 369). . . . [Deliberative efforts] raise many issues central to the theory of deliberative democracy (p. 371), . . . [They] represent a natural experiment in deliberative

democracy [and deserve] the serious attention of the scholarly community.
(Ryfe, 2002, p. 359)

Theoretical Implications

Each of my hypotheses about board work—the several peacekeeping strategies that board members use to make their work doable—can be examined more fully, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Future research may validate my grounded theory, offer other explanatory schemas, and elaborate upon or modify my theory to reflect new data that may be gathered.

Verificational studies can tell us whether or not keeping the peace emerges as a cultural theme in other school board settings. For example, researchers might design contrast studies in which they compare the work of school boards in small, medium, and large districts, in districts with appointed superintendents and those in which superintendents are elected, and in districts where boards are paid and those in which they are unpaid.

Researchers might also examine how the nature of the work affects the pool of citizens willing to serve as school board members and the reasons why some school board members choose not to seek re-election, as well as the dynamics behind board member political defeat. Such studies could inform my theory.

Practical Implications

This study also has practical considerations. My theory can help board members understand forces that influence how they carry out and define their work and recognize common problems and perceptions that board members share. Understanding board work as keeping the peace gives board members information for consideration and options for future actions.

My theory can guide those who design professional board development programs. Board work based upon the corporate-bureaucratic governance model and the democratic governance model rest upon different theories, honor different principles, serve different purposes, and therefore define board effectiveness in different ways. Training programs can be developed that help board members confront complex issues surrounding the board role, consider long-term consequences of their actions, and develop the political will for doing the difficult work of democracy. Future research can examine how such training content and methods affect the way board members view their work, define effectiveness, and view their purpose.

A dialogue among school board members statewide could explore a democratic alternative model for board work, how legislatures might alternatively define board work, and how board-training programs could support a more democratic conception of board work.

Some school districts may be willing to experiment with this new concept of board work. Such a practical experiment could stimulate institutional learning and promote democracy. If one district succeeded in transforming board work according to democratic theory and principles, other districts may well be inspired to follow. A school board democracy project could link theory and practice and answer important questions about the effects of deliberation on actions, policies, and political outcomes. For example, researchers could examine what affect dialogue between the board and the public, regarding the board's role and public expectations, might have on board work and public confidence in school board governance.

Further research should also examine the relationship between how the different views of superintendents toward their role affect the board role, and the relationship

between the different views of the superintendent role and the content of superintendent training programs. Further investigation should consider questions about Florida's elected superintendency and its relationship to board work. Since elected superintendents run the majority of Florida school districts, the majority of Florida boards do not have the power to select a superintendent. Boards who can appoint a superintendent can select a person committed to democratic governance, who, in turn, will hire other school and district leaders who promote the democratic way of life in schools and within the community.

The problem of elected superintendents has been acknowledged by academics in the state. Herrington (1997) notes,

The elected superintendency has been widely criticized as a competing center of political power and as blurring lines of authority between the school board and the superintendent (p. 28). . . . Having an elected school board and an elected school superintendent blurs the distinction between policy setting and administration and diffuses accountability. (p. 31)

Another aspect of school board governance that is unique to Florida, and deserving of further research, is this state's relatively large school board salary. Participants in this study acknowledged that some board members serve for the financial benefits and that these board members often exhibited diminished performance.

The role of school board attorneys in district policy making and their views of their own role, as well as their view of the board's role, may also have an affect on board work. It is a topic that deserves further attention.

Reports of various task forces and commissions, including the Education Commission of the States' report, Governing America's Schools: Changing the Rules (National Commission on Governing America's Schools, 1999), the Educational Research Service's reports, Getting There from Here, School Board-Superintendent

Collaboration: Creating a School Governance Team Capable of Raising Student Achievement (Goodman, R. H., & Zimmerman, W. G., Jr., 1997) and Thinking Differently: Recommendations for 21st Century School Board/Superintendent Leadership, Governance, and Teamwork for High Student Achievement (Goodman, R. H., & Zimmerman, W. G., Jr., (2000), and the Institute for Educational Leadership's report, Leadership for Student Learning: Restructuring School District Leadership (Task Force on School District Leadership, 2001), have all made recommendations for school board governance reform.

These recommendations should be reviewed in terms of their adherence to democratic principles before being adopted in policy or in practice. Some of these reports contain inherent contradictions. For instance, a report by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (1996) recognizes the following threat: "At the same time that we profess our belief that the schools are the bulwarks of democracy, we must concede that in their shortcomings they sow the seeds that could undo democracy" (p. 107). Yet this same report also calls for a corporate-bureaucratic governance model to guide the work of boards. "Boards of education will essentially follow the model of corporate boards in business and industry" (p. 74).

Many foundations and public interest organizations have also published reports dealing with educational governance reform. Public Agenda's Just Waiting to be Asked: A Fresh Look at Attitudes on Public Engagement (Farkas, Foley, Duffett, Foleno, & Johnson, 2001), and a joint report published by Education Week and the Public Education Network, Action for All: The Public's Responsibility for Public Education (Pureifoy & Edwards, 2001), provide more information for examination and review. Such

information may provide rich content for important dialogue that can take place in our local school districts and in state legislatures.

Threat of Peace

One researcher warned nearly thirty years ago, the “growing professional and bureaucratic domination of the educational enterprise” not only insulates schools from the democratic process but also erodes the public’s capacity to influence public education (Usdan, 1975, p. 271). His warning is even more poignant today.

Failing to examine questions of purpose and the values that currently underlie board work and promoting the corporate-bureaucratic governance model, without considering the problems identified in this study, would add to already deep governance problems, moving board members even further from their democratic purpose. The enormity of the challenge of real democratic reform, as well as the importance of the task, can not be understated.

Fields and Feinberg (2001) confront the political aspects of reform and document the struggle to employ democratic methods in school reform. In their ethnographic analysis of site-based reform and of a model of democracy, the Project for Educational Democracy, they find that alliances among people of different beliefs and perspectives, while difficult and insufficient for school reform, are crucial and necessary. They conclude that the struggle over power is central to research on educational change because power relationships have material consequences.

Apple and Beane (1995) note,

In most schools the gap between democratic values and school practices is as wide now as ever (p. v). . . . Despite the rhetoric of democracy in our society and the commonsense idea that the democratic way of life is learned through democratic experiences, schools have been remarkably undemocratic institutions. . . . Those who are more interested in efficiency

and hierarchical power than in the difficult work of transforming schools from the bottom up [often resist the ideas and efforts of those who are committed to democratic education]. (p. 12)

Schmuck and Schmuck (1990a, 1990b, 1992) conducted a study of 25 small school districts in 21 states using open-ended and semi-structured interviews and observation. They note, "The academic side [of schooling] is left to the professionals, and citizens do not engage in discussions with them about teaching and learning" (1990a, p. 15).

Webb and Sherman (1989) suggest,

Reform is an assumption of the democratic process. . . . The abilities to reason, to remain open to competing ideas, to engage in discussion and to form compromises are not easily attained. They take practice, especially in a culture that encourages conformity, obedience, and the development of other-directed individuals. (p. 87)

We must "make certain that the future is determined by people who understand the genius of American democracy and prepare themselves to perfect it" (NAASP, p. 107). Understanding this genius demands that the system charged with instilling democratic values in future generations promotes these values in its governance.

"In a democracy, fundamental reforms . . . cannot succeed without lengthy and searching public dialogue about the ends and means of schooling" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 109). Sarason (1997) writes with a sense of urgency about addressing educational governance problems. "The fate of our educational system, and that of our society, requires a new system of governance" (p. xi).

Conclusion

I have put forth a theory of board work grounded in the material realities of my participants. This theory of board work as keeping the peace increases understanding of what board members do and why they do it. It can predict new board member

experiences and behaviors. Board work, based on the best-practices orthodoxy, becomes organized around the theme of keeping the peace, the district's political peace and school board member psychological peace. Those who attempt to put democratic principles into practice in board work disturb that peace. Keeping the peace is not governance and it has dangerous, long-term consequences for democracy.

My theory explains the sources of problems in board work. These include the bureaucratic structure, the corporate-bureaucratic governance model, and the best practices it promotes, elaborating on how this conception of board work threatens the democratic ideal. The best practices promoted by the corporate-bureaucratic governance model discourage the practices that a democratic theory of governance demands.

My theory adds to the growing body of research that questions the efficacy of school board governance and the purpose and nature of board work. This study is a call for both action and further research to more fully examine the educational governance problem identified here and the opportunities for making board work more democratic.

Aligning the nature of board work with democratic theory will be immensely difficult to achieve, but it is essential. Democratic theory, and the principles that flow from it, are compelling and can inspire board commitment and willingness to undertake the hard work of making democratic educational governance happen.

APPENDIX
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did you originally decide to run for school board? Did anyone encourage you to run or give you initial support? Why?
2. Who were you running against? What were differences? Did opponent(s) represent a group?
3. What was your original platform?
4. What did you learn about campaigning? Any surprises?
5. Why were you elected? What qualifications and/or character traits got you to this position?
6. What was your first real shock after being elected?
7. When you began your term of office would you describe yourself as knowledgeable or naive? Prepared?
8. What do you know now that you wish you had known before you first ran for office?
9. What were your goals upon taking office? Have your goals changed since you were first elected? Did you accomplish them? Why or why not?
10. Describe your job. Is it different from what you expected?
11. What relationships are important in carrying out your responsibilities?
12. How do you cultivate the needed relationships?
13. Are there areas of difficulties with relationships?
14. How did you learn how to do your job? What/Who really helped?
15. What are the characteristics of a good board member?
16. What kinds of things can a good board member accomplish?

17. What are major problem areas? How do you attack a problem?
18. Are there problems that board members are powerless to solve? What are the barriers to problem solving?
19. Who has the most power to make things happen in this school system? Why do they have power, how do they achieve it and how do they maintain it?
20. Would you say that power in this community rests in the hands of a few individuals or groups who really run things . . . or that power is distributed among many groups who must struggle and compromise to get their way?
21. Are there rules that board members should know in order to avoid pitfalls? How do you learn these rules?
22. Are there perennial issues that you face every year? What are they?
23. What advice would you have for someone who is thinking about running for school board?

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH


Janet Herndon began her career in education teaching mathematics in both public and private schools. After receiving her master's degree from the University of South Florida, she spent several years counseling, advising, and teaching at Pasco-Hernando Community College.

She and her husband spent 20 years in rural Citrus County, Florida, where they raised three children. While there, she volunteered in the public schools and served on a school improvement team. She also taught gifted education and began doctoral studies at the University of Florida. As a graduate assistant, she taught Human Growth and Development and supervised pre-interns in the Alachua County Schools.


She served on the Citrus County School Board and on the Florida School Board Association Board of Directors. As a school board member she became interested in the role that educational governance plays in the success of school improvement efforts.

She currently lives in Tallahassee, Florida, where she is a Research Analyst at Florida TaxWatch Research Institute, specializing in education research.

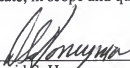
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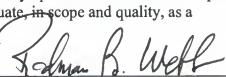
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